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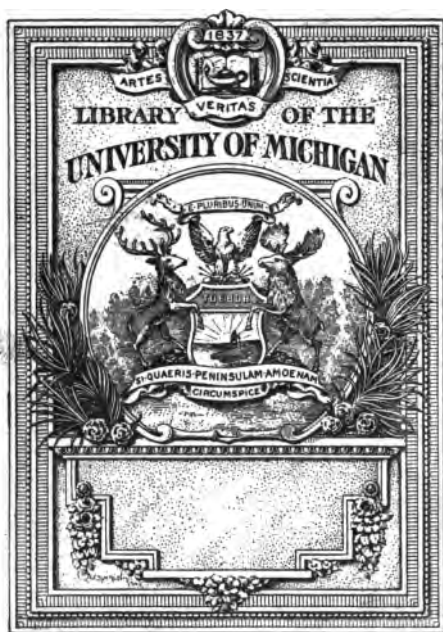
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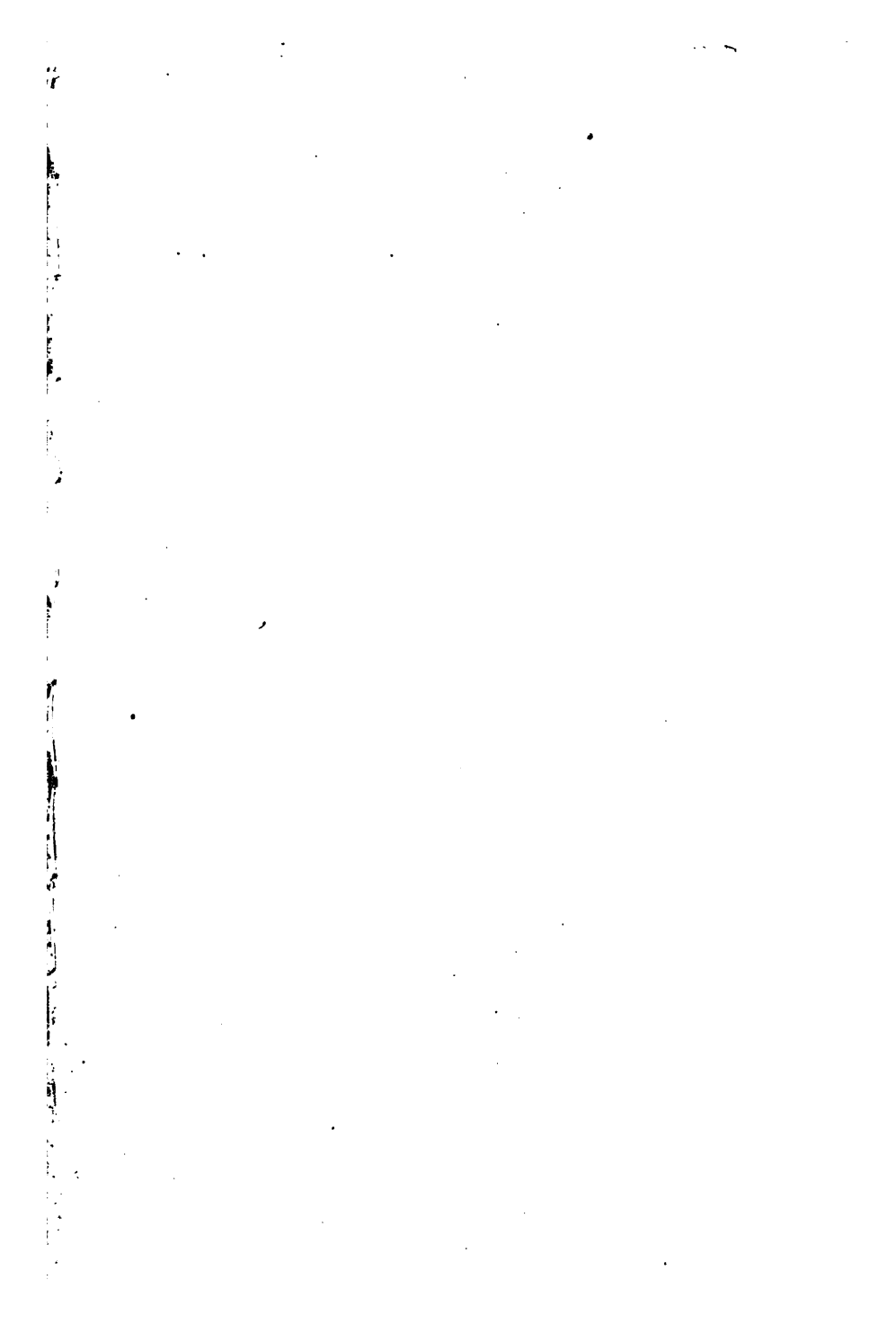
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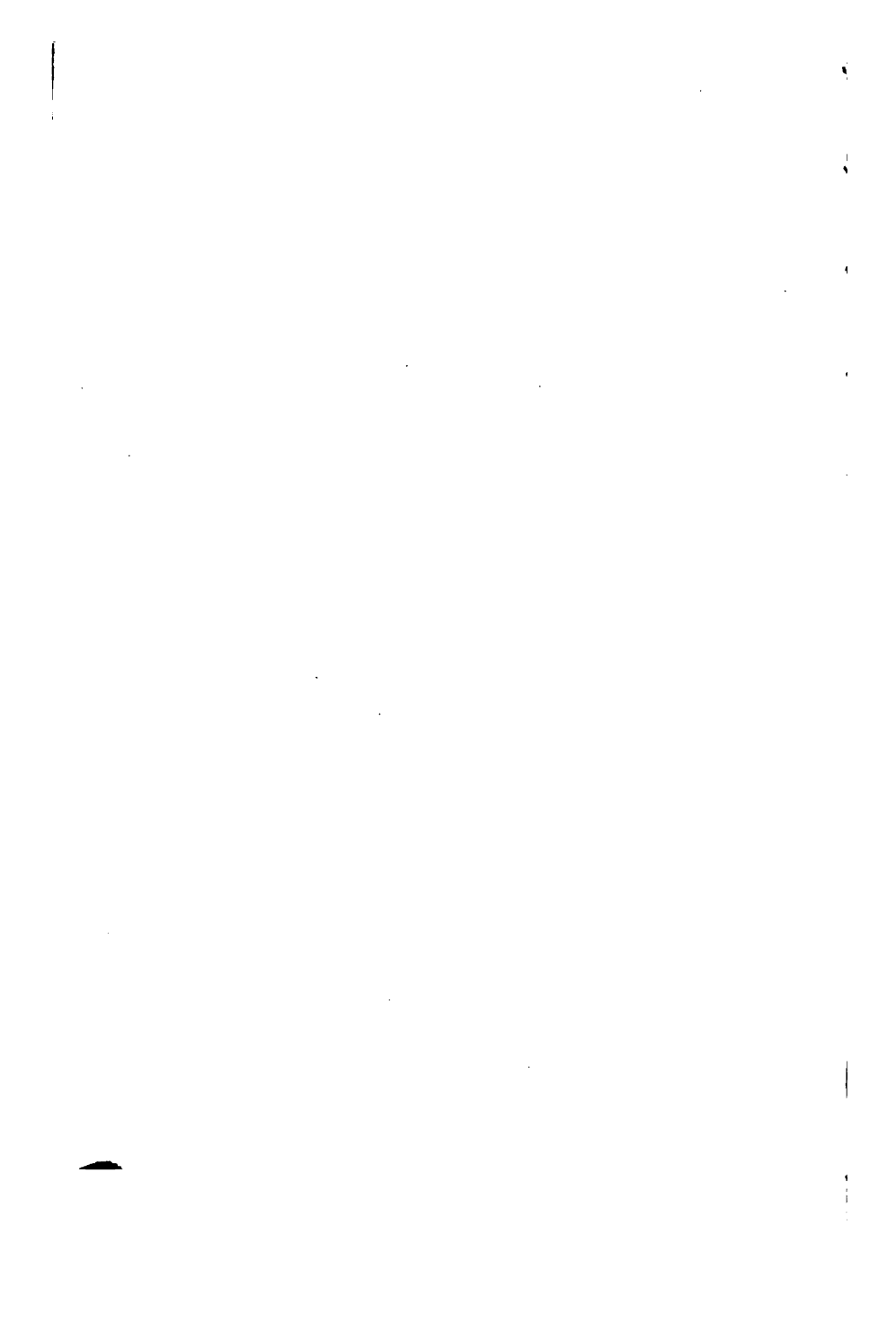
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THE

*1882*

BLACK ROBE

BY

WILKIE COLLINS



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1881

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# THE STORY

*BOOK THE SECOND.*

VOL. II.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE SANDWICH DANCE.

A FINE spring, after a winter of unusual severity, promised well for the prospects of the London season.

Among the social entertainments of the time, general curiosity was excited, in the little sphere which absurdly describes itself under the big name of Society, by the announcement of a party to be given by Lady Loring, bearing the quaint title of a Sandwich Dance. The invitations were issued at an unusually early hour ; and it was understood that nothing so solid and so commonplace as the customary supper was

to be offered to the guests. In a word, Lady Loring's ball was designed as a bold protest against late hours and heavy midnight meals. The younger people were all in favour of the proposed reform. Their elders declined to give an opinion beforehand.

In the small inner circle of Lady Loring's most intimate friends, it was whispered that an innovation in the matter of refreshments was contemplated, which would put the tolerant principles of the guests to a severe test. Miss Notman, the housekeeper, politely threatening retirement on a small annuity, since the memorable affair of the oyster omelette, decided on carrying out her design, when she heard that there was to be no supper. 'My attachment to the family can bear a great



deal,' she said. 'But when Lady Loring deliberately gives a ball, without a supper, I must hide my head somewhere—and it had better be out of the house!' Taking Miss Notman as representative of a class, the reception of the coming experiment looked, to say the least of it, doubtful.

On the appointed evening, the guests made one agreeable discovery when they entered the reception rooms. They were left perfectly free to amuse themselves as they liked.

The drawing-rooms were given up to dancing; the picture gallery was devoted to chamber music. Chess-players and card-players found remote and quiet rooms especially prepared for them. People who cared for nothing but talking were accommodated to perfection in a sphere of their own.

And lovers (in earnest or not in earnest) discovered, in a dimly-lit conservatory with many recesses, that ideal of discreet retirement which combines solitude and society under one roof.

But the ordering of the refreshments failed, as had been foreseen, to share in the approval conferred on the arrangement of the rooms. The first impression was unfavourable. Lady Loring, however, knew enough of human nature to leave results to two potent allies—experience and time.

Excepting the conservatory, the astonished guests could go nowhere without discovering tables prettily decorated with flowers, and bearing hundreds of little pure white china plates, loaded with nothing but sandwiches. All varieties of opinion were consulted. People of ordinary tastes, who

liked to know what they were eating, could choose conventional beef or ham, encased in thin slices of bread of a delicate flavour quite new to them. Other persons, less easily pleased, were tempted by sandwiches of *pâté de foie gras*, and by exquisite combinations of chicken and truffles, reduced to a creamy pulp which clung to the bread like butter. Foreigners, making experiments, and not averse to garlic, discovered the finest sausages of Germany and Italy transformed into English sandwiches. Anchovies and sardines appealed, in the same unexpected way, to men who desired to create an artificial thirst—after having first ascertained that the champagne was something to be fondly remembered and regretted, at other parties, to the end of the season. The hospitable profusion of the refreshments was

all-pervading and inexhaustible. Wherever the guests might be, or however they were amusing themselves, there were the pretty little white plates perpetually tempting them. People eat as they had never eat before, and even the inveterate English prejudice against anything new was conquered at last. Universal opinion declared the Sandwich Dance to be an admirable idea, perfectly carried out.

Many of the guests paid their hostess the compliment of arriving at the early hour mentioned in the invitations. One of them was Major Hynd. Lady Loring took her first opportunity of speaking to him apart.

‘I hear you were a little angry,’ she said, ‘when you were told that Miss Eyrecourt had taken your inquiries out of your hands.’

‘I thought it rather a bold proceeding,

Lady Loring,' the Major replied. 'But as the General's widow turned out to be a lady, in the best sense of the word, Miss Eyrecourt's romantic adventure has justified itself. I wouldn't recommend her to run the same risk a second time.'

'I suppose you know what Romaine thinks of it?'

'Not yet. I have been too busy to call on him since I have been in town. Pardon me, Lady Loring, who is that beautiful creature in the pale yellow dress? Surely I have seen her somewhere before?'

'That beautiful creature, Major, is the bold young lady of whose conduct you don't approve.'

'Miss Eyrecourt?'

'Yes.'

'I retract everything I said!' cried the

Major, quite shamelessly. 'Such a woman as that may do anything. She is looking this way. Pray introduce me.'

The Major was introduced, and Lady Loring returned to her guests.

'I think we have met before, Major Hynd,' said Stella.

Her voice supplied the missing link in the Major's memory of events. Remembering how she had looked at Romaine on the deck of the steamboat, he began dimly to understand Miss Eyrecourt's otherwise incomprehensible anxiety to be of use to the General's family. 'I remember perfectly,' he answered. 'It was on the passage from Boulogne to Folkestone—and my friend was with me. You and he have no doubt met since that time?' He put the question as a mere formality. The unexpressed thought

in him was, 'Another of them in love with Romaine! and nothing, as usual, likely to come of it.'

'I hope you have forgiven me for going to Camp's Hill in your place,' said Stella.

'I ought to be grateful to you,' the Major rejoined. 'No time has been lost in relieving these poor people—and your powers of persuasion have succeeded, where mine might have failed. Has Romaine been to see them himself since his return to London?'

'No. He desires to remain unknown; and he is kindly content, for the present, to be represented by me.'

'For the present?' Major Hynd repeated.

A faint flush passed over her delicate complexion. 'I have succeeded,' she resumed, 'in inducing Madame Marillac to

accept the help offered through me to her son. The poor creature is safe, under kind superintendence, in a private asylum. So far, I can do no more.'

'Will the mother accept nothing?'

'Nothing, either for herself or her daughter, so long as they can work. I cannot tell you how patiently and beautifully she speaks of her hard lot. But her health may give way—and it is possible, before long, that I may leave London.' She paused; the flush deepened on her face. 'The failure of the mother's health may happen in my absence,' she continued; 'and Mr. Romaine will ask you to look after the family, from time to time, while I am away.'

'I will do it with pleasure, Miss Eyrecourt. Is Romaine likely to be here to-night?'



She smiled brightly, and looked away. The Major's curiosity was excited—he looked in the same direction. There was Romaine, entering the room, to answer for himself.

What was the attraction which drew the unsocial student to an evening party? Major Hynd's eyes were on the watch. When Romaine and Stella shook hands, the attraction stood self-revealed to him, in Miss Eyrecourt. Recalling the momentary confusion which she had betrayed, when she spoke of possibly leaving London, and of Romaine's plans for supplying her place as his almoner, the Major, with military impatience of delays, jumped to a conclusion. 'I was wrong,' he thought; 'my impenetrable friend is touched in the right place at last. When the splendid creature in yellow

leaves London, the name on her luggage will be Mrs. Romaine.'

'You are looking quite another man, Romaine!' he said mischievously, 'since we met last.'

Stella gently moved away, leaving them to talk freely. Romaine took no advantage of the circumstance to admit his old friend to his confidence. Whatever relations might really exist between Miss Eyrecourt and himself were evidently kept secret thus far. 'My health has been a little better lately,' was the only reply he made.

The Major dropped his voice to a whisper.

'Have you not had any return——?' he began.

Romaine stopped him there. 'I don't want my infirmities made public,' he whis-

pered back irritably. 'Look at the people all round us! When I tell you I have been better lately, *you* ought to know what it means.'

'Any discoverable reason for the improvement?' persisted the Major, still bent on getting evidence in support of his own private conclusions.

'None!' Romaine answered sharply.

But Major Hynd was not to be discouraged by sharp replies. 'Miss Eyrecourt and I have been recalling our first meeting on board the steamboat,' he went on. 'Do you remember how indifferent you were to that beautiful person when I asked you if you knew her? I'm glad to see that you show better taste to-night. I wish *I* knew her well enough to shake hands as you did.'

'Hynd! When a young man talks

nonsense, his youth is his excuse. At your time of life, you have passed the excusable age—even in the estimation of your friends.'

With those words Romaine turned away. The incorrigible Major instantly met the reproof inflicted on him with a smart answer. 'Remember,' he said, 'that I was the first of your friends to wish you happiness!' He, too, turned away—in the direction of the champagne and the sandwiches.

Meanwhile, Stella had discovered Penrose, lost in the brilliant assemblage of guests, standing alone in a corner. It was enough for her that Romaine's secretary was also Romaine's friend. Passing by titled and celebrated personages, all anxious to speak to her, she joined the shy, nervous, sad-looking little man, and did all she could to set him at his ease.

‘I am afraid, Mr. Penrose, this is not a very attractive scene to you.’ Having said those kind words, she paused. Penrose was looking at her confusedly, but with an expression of interest which was new to her experience of him. ‘Has Romaine told him?’ she wondered inwardly.

‘It is a very beautiful scene, Miss Eyre-court,’ he said, in his low quiet tones.

‘Did you come here with Mr. Romaine?’ she asked.

‘Yes. It was by his advice that I accepted the invitation with which Lady Loring has honoured me. I am sadly out of place in such an assembly as this—but I would make far greater sacrifices to please Mr. Romaine.’

She smiled kindly. Attachment, so artlessly devoted to the man she loved, pleased

and touched her. In her anxiety to discover a subject which might interest him, she overcame her antipathy to the spiritual director of the household. 'Is Father Benwell coming to us to-night?' she inquired.

'He will certainly be here, Miss Eyrecourt, if he can get back to London in time.'

'Has he been long away?'

'Nearly a week.'

Not knowing what else to say, she still paid Penrose the compliment of feigning an interest in Father Benwell.

'Has he a long journey to make in returning to London?' she asked.

'Yes—all the way from Devonshire.'

'From South Devonshire?'

'No. North Devonshire—Clovelly.'

The smile suddenly left her face. She put another question—without quite con-

cealing the effort that it cost her, or the anxiety with which she waited for the reply.

‘I know something of the neighbourhood of Clovelly,’ she said. ‘I wonder whether Father Benwell is visiting any friends of mine there?’

‘I am not able to say, Miss Eyrecourt. The reverend Father’s letters are forwarded to the hotel—I know no more than that.’

With a gentle inclination of her head, she turned towards other guests—looked back—and, with a last little courteous attention offered to him, said, ‘If you like music, Mr. Penrose, I advise you to go to the picture gallery. They are going to play a Quartette by Mozart.’

Penrose thanked her, noticing that her voice and manner had become strangely subdued. She made her way back to the

room in which the hostess received her guests. Lady Loring was, for the moment, alone, resting on a sofa. Stella stooped over her, and spoke in cautiously-lowered tones.

‘If Father Benwell comes here to-night,’ she said, ‘try to find out what he has been doing at Clovelly.’

‘Clovelly?’ Lady Loring repeated. ‘Is that the village near Winterfield’s house?’

‘Yes.’



## CHAPTER II.

## THE QUESTION OF MARRIAGE.

As Stella answered Lady Loring, she was smartly tapped on the shoulder by an eager guest with a fan.

The guest was a very little woman, with twinkling eyes and a perpetual smile. Nature, corrected by powder and paint, was liberally displayed in her arms, her bosom, and the upper part of her back. Such clothes as she wore, defective perhaps in quantity, were in quality absolutely perfect. More adorable colour, shape, and workmanship never appeared, even in a milliner's picture-book. Her light hair was

dressed with a fringe and ringlets, on the pattern which the portraits of the time of Charles the Second have made familiar to us. There was nothing exactly young or exactly old about her except her voice, which betrayed a faint hoarseness, attributable possibly to exhaustion produced by untold years of incessant talking. It might be added that she was as active as a squirrel and as playful as a kitten. But the lady must be treated with a certain forbearance of tone, for this good reason—she was Stella's mother.

Stella turned quickly at the tap of the fan. 'Mamma!' she exclaimed, 'how you startle me!'

'My dear child,' said Mrs. Eyrecourt, 'you are constitutionally indolent, and you want startling. Go into the next room

directly. Mr. Romaine is looking for you.'

Stella drew back a step, and eyed her mother in blank surprise. 'Is it possible that you know him?' she asked.

'Mr. Romaine doesn't go into society, or we] should have met long since,' Mrs. Eyrecourt replied. 'He is a striking person—and I noticed him when he shook hands with you. That was quite enough for me. I have just introduced myself to him as your mother. He was a little stately and stiff, but most charming when he knew who I was. I volunteered to find you. He was quite astonished. I think he took me for your elder sister. Not the least like each other—are we, Lady Loring? She takes after her poor dear father. *He* was constitutionally indolent. My sweet

child, rouse yourself. You have drawn a prize in the great lottery at last. If ever a man was in love, Mr. Romaine is that man. I am a physiognomist, Lady Loring, and I see the passions in the face. Oh, Stella, what a property! Vange Abbey. I once drove that way when I was visiting in the neighbourhood. Superb! And another fortune (twelve thousand a year and a villa at Highgate) since the death of his aunt. And my daughter may be mistress of this if she only plays her cards properly. What a compensation after all that we suffered through that monster, Winterfield!

‘Mamma! Pray don’t——!’

‘Stella, I will *not* be interrupted, when I am speaking to you for your own good. I don’t know a more provoking person, Lady Loring, than my daughter—on certain

occasions. And yet I love her. I would go through fire and water for my beautiful child. Only last week I was at a wedding, and I thought of Stella. The church was crammed to the doors! A hundred at the wedding breakfast! The bride's lace—there! no language can describe it. Ten bridesmaids, in blue and silver. Reminded me of the ten virgins. Only the proportion of foolish ones, this time, was certainly more than five. However, they looked well. The Archbishop proposed the health of the bride and bridegroom; so sweetly pathetic. Some of us cried. I thought of my daughter. Oh, if I could live to see Stella the central attraction, so to speak, of such a wedding as that. Only I would have twelve bridesmaids at least, and beat the blue and silver with green and gold. Trying to the complexion,

you will say. But there are artificial improvements. At least, I am told so. What a house this would be—a broad hint, isn't it, dear Lady Loring?—what a house for a wedding, with the drawing-room to assemble in and the picture gallery for the breakfast. I know the Archbishop. My darling, he shall marry you. Why *don't* you go into the next room? Ah, that constitutional indolence. If you only had my energy, as I used to say to your poor father. *Will* you go? Yes, dear Lady Loring, I should like a glass of champagne, and another of those delicious chicken sandwiches. If you don't go, Stella, I shall forget every consideration of propriety, and, big as you are, I shall push you out.'

Stella yielded to necessity. 'Keep her quiet, if you can,' she whispered to Lady

Loring, in the moment of silence that followed. Even Mrs. Eyrecourt was not able to talk while she was drinking champagne.

In the next room Stella found Romaine. He looked careworn and irritable, but brightened directly when she approached him.

‘My mother has been speaking to you,’ she said. ‘I am afraid——’

He stopped her there. ‘She *is* your mother,’ he interposed kindly. ‘Don’t think that I am ungrateful enough to forget that.’

She took his arm, and looked at him with all her heart in her eyes. ‘Come into a quieter room,’ she whispered.

Romaine led her away. Neither of them noticed Penrose as they left the room.

He had not moved since Stella had spoken to him. There he remained in his corner, absorbed in thought—and not in happy thought, as his face would have plainly betrayed to anyone who had cared to look at him. His eyes sadly followed the retiring figures of Stella and Romaine. The colour rose on his haggard cheeks. Like most men who are accustomed to live alone, he had the habit, when he was strongly excited, of speaking to himself. ‘No,’ he said, as the unacknowledged lovers disappeared through the door, ‘it is an insult to ask me to do it!’ He turned the other way, escaped Lady Loring’s notice in the reception-room, and left the house.

Romaine and Stella passed through the card-room and the chess-room, turned into a corridor, and entered the conservatory.



For the first time the place was a solitude. The air of a newly-invented dance, faintly audible through the open windows of the ball-room above, had proved an irresistible temptation. Those who knew the dance were eager to exhibit themselves. Those who had only heard of it were equally anxious to look on and learn. Even towards the latter end of the nineteenth century the youths and maidens of Society can still be in earnest—when the object in view is a new dance.

What would Major Hynd have said if he had seen Romaine turn into one of the recesses of the conservatory, in which there was a seat which just held two? But the Major had forgotten his years and his family, and he too was one of the spectators in the ball-room.

‘I wonder,’ said Stella, ‘whether you know how I feel those kind words of yours when you spoke of my mother. Shall I tell you?’

She put her arm round his neck and kissed him. He was a man new to love, in the nobler sense of the word. The exquisite softness in the touch of her lips, the delicious fragrance of her breath, intoxicated him. Again and again he returned the kiss. She drew back ; she recovered her self-possession with a suddenness and a certainty incomprehensible to a man. From the depths of tenderness she passed to the shallows of frivolity. In her own defence she was almost as superficial as her mother, in less than a moment.

‘What would Mr. Penrose say if he saw you?’ she whispered.

‘Why do you speak of Penrose? Have you seen him to-night?’

‘Yes—looking sadly out of his element, poor man. I did my best to set him at his ease—because I know *you* like him.’

‘Dear Stella!’

‘No, not again! I am speaking seriously now. Mr. Penrose looked at me with a strange kind of interest—I can’t describe it. Have you taken him into our confidence?’

‘He is so devoted—he has such a true interest in me,’ said Romaine—‘I really felt ashamed to treat him like a stranger. On our journey to London I did own that it was your charming letter which had decided me on returning. I did say, ‘I must tell her myself how well she has understood me, and how deeply I feel her kindness.’ Penrose

took my hand, in his gentle considerate way. "I understand you, too," he said—and that was all that passed between us.'

'Nothing more, since that time?'

'Nothing.'

'Not a word of what we said to each other when we were alone last week in the picture gallery?'

'Not a word. I am self-tormentor enough to distrust myself, even now. God knows, I have concealed nothing from you; and yet—— Am I not selfishly thinking of my own happiness, Stella, when I ought to be thinking only of you? You know, my angel, with what a life you must associate yourself if you marry me. Are you really sure that you have love enough and courage enough to be my wife?'

She rested her head caressingly on his

shoulder, and looked up at him with her charming smile.

‘How many times must I say it,’ she asked, ‘before you will believe me? Once more—I have love enough and courage enough to be your wife; and I knew it, Lewis, the first time I saw you! Will *that* confession satisfy your scruples? And will you promise never again to doubt yourself or me?’

Romayne promised, and sealed the promise—unresisted this time—with a kiss. ‘When are we to be married?’ he whispered.

She lifted her head from his shoulder with a sigh. ‘If I am to answer you honestly,’ she replied, ‘I must speak of my mother, before I speak of myself.’

Romayne submitted to the duties of his

new position, as well as he understood them. 'Do you mean that you have told your mother of our engagement?' he said. 'In that case, is it my duty or yours—I am very ignorant in these matters—to consult her wishes? My own idea is, that I ought to ask her if she approves of me as her son-in-law, and that you might then speak to her of the marriage.'

Stella thought of Romaine's tastes, all in favour of modest retirement, and of her mother's tastes, all in favour of ostentation and display. She frankly owned the result produced in her own mind. 'I am afraid to consult my mother about our marriage,' she said.

Romaine looked astonished. 'Do you think Mrs. Eyrecourt will disapprove of it?' he asked.

Stella was equally astonished on her side. 'Disapprove of it?' she repeated. 'I know for certain that my mother will be delighted.'

'Then where is the difficulty?'

There was but one way of definitely answering that question. Stella boldly described her mother's idea of a wedding—including the Archbishop, the twelve bridesmaids in green and gold, and the hundred guests at breakfast in Lord Loring's picture gallery. Romaine's consternation literally deprived him, for the moment, of the power of speech. To say that he looked at Stella, as a prisoner in 'the condemned cell' might have looked at the sheriff, announcing the morning of his execution, would be to do injustice to the prisoner. He receives *his* shock without flinching; and, in proof of

his composure, celebrates his wedding with the gallows by a breakfast which he will not live to digest.

‘If you think as your mother does,’ Romaine began, as soon as he had recovered his self-possession, ‘no opinion of mine shall stand in the way——’ He could get no further. His vivid imagination saw the Archbishop and the bridesmaids, heard the hundred guests and their dreadful speeches : his voice faltered, in spite of himself.

Stella eagerly relieved him. ‘My darling, I don’t think as my mother does,’ she interposed tenderly. ‘I am sorry to say we have very few sympathies in common. Marriages, as I think, ought to be celebrated as privately as possible—the near and dear relations present, and no one else. If there must be rejoicings and banquets, and



hundreds of invitations, let them come when the wedded pair are at home after the honeymoon, beginning life in earnest. These are odd ideas for a woman to have—but they *are* my ideas, for all that.'

Romayne's face brightened. 'How few women possess your fine sense and your delicacy of feeling!' he exclaimed. 'Surely your mother must give way, when she hears we are both of one mind about our marriage?'

Stella knew her mother too well to share the opinion thus expressed. Mrs. Eyre-court's capacity for holding to her own little ideas, and for persisting (where her social interests were concerned) in trying to insinuate those ideas into the minds of other persons, was a capacity which no resistance, short of absolute brutality, could overcome. She

was perfectly capable of worrying Romaine (as well as her daughter) to the utmost limits of human endurance; in the firm conviction that she was bound to convert all heretics, of their way of thinking, to the orthodox faith in the matter of weddings. Putting this view of the case with all possible delicacy, in speaking of her mother, Stella expressed herself plainly enough, nevertheless, to enlighten Romaine.

He made another suggestion. 'Can we marry privately,' he said, 'and tell Mrs. Eyrecourt of it afterwards?'

This essentially masculine solution of the difficulty was at once rejected. Stella was too good a daughter to suffer her mother to be treated with even the appearance of disrespect. 'Oh,' she said, 'think how mortified and distressed my mother

would be! She *must* be present at my marriage.'

An idea of a compromise occurred to Romaine. 'What do you say,' he proposed, 'to arranging for the marriage privately—  
—and then telling Mrs. Eyrecourt only a day or two beforehand, when it would be too late to send out invitations? If your mother would be disappointed——'

'She would be angry,' Stella interposed.

'Very well—lay all the blame on me. Besides, there might be two other persons present, whom I am sure Mrs. Eyrecourt is always glad to meet. You don't object to Lord and Lady Loring?'

'Object? They are my dearest friends, as well as your's!'

'Anyone else, Stella?'

'Anyone, Lewis, whom *you* like.'

‘Then I say—no one else. My own love, when may it be? My lawyers can get the settlements ready in a fortnight, or less. Will you say in a fortnight?’

His arm was round her waist; his lips were touching her lovely neck. She was not a woman to take refuge in the commonplace coqueties of the sex. ‘Yes,’ she said softly, ‘if you wish it.’ She rose, and withdrew herself from him. ‘For my sake, we must not be here together any longer, Lewis.’ As she spoke, the music in the ball-room ceased. Stella ran out of the conservatory.

The first person she encountered, on returning to the reception-room, was Father Benwell.

## CHAPTER III.

## THE END OF THE BALL.

THE priest's long journey did not appear to have fatigued him. He was as cheerful and as polite as ever—and so paternally attentive to Stella that it was quite impossible for her to pass him with a formal bow.

‘I have come all the way from Devonshire,’ he said. ‘The train has been behind time as usual, and I am one of the late arrivals in consequence. I miss some familiar faces at this delightful party. Mr. Romaine, for instance. Perhaps he is not one of the guests?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Has he gone away?’

‘Not that I know of.’

The tone of her replies warned Father Benwell to let Romaine be. He tried another name. ‘And Arthur Penrose?’ he inquired next.

‘I think Mr. Penrose has left us.’

As she answered she looked towards Lady Loring. The hostess was the centre of a circle of ladies and gentlemen. Before she was at liberty, Father Benwell might take his departure. Stella resolved to make the attempt for herself which she had asked Lady Loring to make for her. It was better to try, and to be defeated, than not to try at all.

‘I asked Mr. Penrose what part of Devonshire you were visiting,’ she resumed, assuming her more gracious manner. ‘I

know something myself of the north coast, especially the neighbourhood of Clovelly.'

Not the faintest change passed over the priest's face ; his fatherly smile had never been in a better state of preservation.

'Isn't it a charming place?' he said with enthusiasm. 'Clovelly is the most remarkable and most beautiful village in England. I have so enjoyed my little holiday—excursions by sea and excursions by land—do you know I feel quite young again!'

He lifted his eyebrows playfully, and rubbed his plump hands one over the other with such an intolerably innocent air of enjoyment that Stella positively hated him. She felt her capacity for self-restraint failing her. Under the influence of strong emotion her thoughts lost their customary discipline. In attempting to fathom Father Benwell, she

was conscious of having undertaken a task which required more pliable moral qualities than she possessed. To her own unutterable annoyance, she was at a loss what to say next. At that critical moment her mother appeared—eager for news of the conquest of Romaine.

‘My dear child, how pale you look!’ said Mrs. Eyrecourt. ‘Come with me directly—you must have a glass of wine.’

This dexterous device for entrapping Stella into a private conversation failed. ‘Not now, Mamma, thank you,’ she said.

Father Benwell, on the point of discreetly withdrawing, stopped, and looked at Mrs. Eyrecourt with an appearance of respectful interest. As things were, it might not have been worth his while to take the trouble of discovering her. But when she actually



placed herself in his way, the chance of turning Mrs. Eyrecourt to useful account was not a chance to be neglected. 'Your mother?' he said to Stella. 'I should feel honoured if you will introduce me.'

Having (not very willingly) performed the ceremony of presentation, Stella drew back a little. She had no desire to take any part in the conversation that might follow—but she had her own reasons for waiting near enough to hear it.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Eyrecourt turned on her inexhaustible flow of small-talk with her customary facility. No distinction of persons troubled her; no convictions of any sort stood in her way. She was equally ready (provided she met him in good society) to make herself agreeable to a Puritan or a Papist.

‘Delighted to make your acquaintance, Father Benwell. Surely I met you at that delightful evening at the Duke’s? I mean when we welcomed the Cardinal back from Rome. Dear old man—if one may speak so familiarly of a Prince of the Church. How charmingly he bears his new honours. Such patriarchal simplicity, as everyone remarked. Have you seen him lately?’

The idea of the Order to which he belonged feeling any special interest in a Cardinal (except when they made him of some use to them), privately amused Father Benwell. ‘How wise the Church was,’ he thought, ‘in inventing a spiritual aristocracy. Even this fool of a woman is impressed by it.’ His spoken reply was true to his assumed character as one of the inferior clergy. ‘Poor priests like me, madam, see

but little of Princes of the Church in the houses of Dukes.' Saying this with the most becoming humility, he turned the talk in a more productive direction, before Mrs. Eyrecourt could proceed with her recollections of 'the evening at the Duke's.'

'Your charming daughter and I have been talking about Clovelly,' he continued. 'I have just been spending a little holiday in that delightful place. It was a surprise to me, Mrs. Eyrecourt, to see so many really beautiful country seats in the neighbourhood. I was particularly struck—you know it, of course?—by Beaupark House.'

Mrs. Eyrecourt's little twinkling eyes suddenly became still and steady. It was only for a moment. But that trifling change boded ill for the purpose which the priest had in view. Even the wits of a fool can

be quickened by contact with the world. For many years Mrs. Eyrecourt had held her place in society ; acting under an intensely selfish sense of her own interests, fortified by those cunning instincts which grow best in a barren intellect. Perfectly unworthy of being trusted with secrets which only concerned other people, this frivolous creature could be the unassailable guardian of secrets which concerned herself. The instant the priest referred indirectly to Winterfield, by speaking of Beaupark House, her instincts warned her, as if in words :—Be careful for Stella's sake !

‘Oh, yes ;’ said Mrs. Eyrecourt. ‘I know Beaupark House ; but—— may I make a confession ?’ she added, with her sweetest smile.

Father Benwell caught her tone, with his

customary tact. 'A confession at a ball is a novelty; even in my experience,' he answered with *his* sweetest smile.'

'How good of you to encourage me!' proceeded Mrs. Eyrecourt. 'No, thank you, I don't want to sit down. My confession won't take long—and I really must give that poor pale daughter of mine a glass of wine. A student of human nature like you—they say all priests are students of human nature; accustomed of course to be consulted in difficulties, and to hear *real* confessions—must know that we poor women are sadly subject to whims and caprices. We can't resist them as men do; and the dear good men generally make allowances for us. Well, do you know that place of Mr. Winterfield's is one of my caprices? Oh, dear, I speak carelessly; I ought to

have said the place *represents* one of my caprices. In short, Father Benwell, Beaupark House is perfectly odious to me, and I think Clovelly the most overrated place in the world. I haven't the least reason to give, but so it is. Excessively foolish of me. It's like hysterics, I can't help it; I'm sure you will forgive me. There isn't a place on the habitable globe that I am not ready to feel interested in, except detestable Devonshire. I am so sorry you went there. The next time you have a holiday, take my advice. Try the Continent.'

'I should like it of all things,' said Father Benwell. 'Only I don't speak French. Allow me to get Miss Eyrecourt a glass of wine.'

He spoke with the most perfect temper and tranquillity. Having paid his little attention to Stella, and having relieved

her of the empty glass, he took his leave, with a parting request thoroughly characteristic of the man.

‘Are you staying in town, Mrs. Eyrecourt?’ he asked.

‘Oh, of course, at the height of the season!’

‘May I have the honour of calling on you—and talking a little more about the Continent?’

If he had said it in so many words, he could hardly have informed Mrs. Eyrecourt more plainly that he thoroughly understood her, and that he meant to try again. Strong in the worldly training of half a lifetime, she at once informed him of her address, with the complimentary phrases proper to the occasion. ‘Five o’clock tea on Wednesdays, Father Benwell. Don’t forget!’

The moment he was gone, she drew her daughter into a quiet corner. 'Don't be frightened, Stella. That sly old person has some interest in trying to find out about Winterfield. Do you know why?'

'Indeed I don't, mamma. I hate him!'

'Oh, hush! hush! Hate him as much as you like; but always be civil to him. Tell me—have you been in the conservatory with Romaine?'

'Yes.'

'All going on well?'

'Yes.'

'My sweet child! Dear, dear me, the wine has done you no good; you're as pale as ever. Is it that priest? Oh, pooh, pooh, leave Father Benwell to me'



## CHAPTER IV.

### IN THE SMALL HOURS.

WHEN Stella left the conservatory, the attraction of the ball for Romaine was at an end. He went back to his rooms at the hotel.

Penrose was waiting to speak to him. Romaine noticed signs of suppressed agitation in his secretary's face. 'Has anything happened?' he inquired.

'Nothing of any importance,' Penrose answered, in sad, subdued tones. 'I only wanted to ask you for leave of absence.'

'Certainly. Is it for a long time?'

Penrose hesitated. 'You have a new

life opening before you,' he said. 'If your experience of that life is—as I hope and pray it may be—a happy one, you will need me no longer; we may not meet again.' His voice began to tremble; he could say no more.

'Not meet again?' Romaine repeated. 'My dear Penrose, if *you* forget how many happy days I owe to your companionship, *my* memory is to be trusted. Do you really know what my new life is to be?' Shall I tell you what I have said to Stella to-night?'

Penrose lifted his hand with a gesture of entreaty.

'Not a word!' he said, eagerly. 'Do me one more kindness—leave me to be prepared (as I *am* prepared) for the change that is to come, without any confidence on your

part to enlighten me further. Don't think me ungrateful. I have reasons for saying what I have just said—I cannot mention what they are—I can only tell you they are serious reasons. You have spoken of my devotion to you. If you wish to reward me a hundredfold more than I deserve, bear in mind our conversations on religion, and keep the books I asked you to read as gifts from a friend who loves you with his whole heart. No new duties that you can undertake are incompatible with the higher interests of your soul. Think of me sometimes. When I leave you I go back to a lonely life. My poor heart is full of your brotherly kindness at this last moment when I may be saying good-bye for ever. And what is my one consolation? What helps me to bear my hard lot? The Faith that I hold! Remember

that, Romaine. If there comes a time of sorrow in the future, remember that.'

Romaine was more than surprised, he was shocked. 'Why must you leave me?' he asked.

'It is best for you and for *her*,' said Penrose, 'that I should withdraw myself from your new life.'

He held out his hand. Romaine refused to let him go. 'Penrose!' he said, 'I can't match your resignation. Give me something to look forward to. I must and will see you again.'

Penrose smiled sadly. 'You know that my career in life depends wholly on my superiors,' he answered. 'But if I am still in England—and if you have sorrows in the future that I can share and alleviate—only let me know it. There is nothing within the

compass of my power which I will not do for your sake. God bless and prosper you! Good-bye!’

. In spite of his fortitude, the tears rose in his eyes. He hurried out of the room.

Romayne sat down at his writing-table, and hid his face in his hands. He had entered the room with the bright image of Stella in his mind. The image had faded from it now—the grief that was in him not even the beloved woman could share. His thoughts were wholly with the brave and patient Christian who had left him—the true man, whose spotless integrity no evil influence could corrupt. By what inscrutable fatality do some men find their way into spheres that are unworthy of them? Oh, Penrose, if the priests of your Order were all like you, how easily I should be converted! These were

Romayne's thoughts, in the stillness of the first hours of the morning. The books of which his lost friend had spoken 'were close by him on the table. He opened one of them, and turned to a page marked by pencil lines. His sensitive nature was troubled to its inmost depths. The confession of that Faith which had upheld Penrose was before him in words. The impulse was strong in him to read those words, and think over them again.

He trimmed his lamp, and bent his mind on his book. While he was still reading, the ball at Lord Loring's house came to its end. Stella and Lady Loring were alone together, talking of him, before they retired to their rooms.

'Forgive me for owning it plainly,' said Lady Loring—'I think you and your mother

are a little too ready to suspect Father Benwell without any discoverable cause. Thousands of people go to Clovelly, and Beaupark House is one of the show-places in the neighbourhood. Is there a little Protestant prejudice in this new idea of yours ?'

Stella made no reply ; she seemed to be lost in her own thoughts.

Lady Loring went on.

'I am open to conviction, my dear. If you will only tell me what interest Father Benwell can have in knowing about you and Winterfield——'

Stella suddenly looked up. 'Let us speak of another person,' she said ; 'I own I don't like Father Benwell. As you know, Romaine has concealed nothing from me. Ought I to have any concealments from *him* ? Ought I not to tell *him* about Winterfield ?'

Lady Loring started. 'You astonish me,' she said. 'What right has Romaine to know it?'

'What right have I to keep it a secret from him?'

'My dear Stella! if you had been in any way to blame, in that miserable matter, I should be the last person in the world to advise you to keep it a secret. But you are innocent of all blame. No man—not even the man who is soon to be your husband—has a right to know what you have so unjustly suffered. Think of the humiliation of even speaking of it to Romaine!'

'I daren't think of it,' cried Stella passionately. 'But if it is my duty——'

'It is your duty to consider the consequences,' Lady Loring interposed. 'You don't know how such things sometimes rankle



in a man's mind. He may be perfectly willing to do you justice—and yet, there may be moments when he would doubt if you had told him the whole truth. I speak with the experience of a married woman. Don't place yourself in *that* position towards your husband, if you wish for a happy married life.'

Stella was not quite convinced yet. 'Suppose Romaine finds it out?' she said.

'He can't possibly find it out. I detest Winterfield, but let us do him justice. He is no fool. He has his position in the world to keep up—and that is enough of itself to close his lips. And as for others, there are only three people now in England who *could* betray you. I suppose you can trust your mother, and Lord Loring, and me?'

It was needless to answer such a question

as that. Before Stella could speak again, Lord Loring's voice was audible outside the door. 'What! talking still,' he exclaimed. 'Not in bed yet?'

'Come in!' cried his wife. 'Let us hear what my husband thinks,' she said to Stella.

Lord Loring listened with the closest attention while the subject under discussion was communicated to him. When the time came to give his opinion, he sided unhesitatingly with his wife.

'If the fault was yours, even in the slightest degree,' he said to Stella, 'Romeyne would have a right to be taken into your confidence. But, my dear child, we, who know the truth, know you to be a pure and innocent woman. You go to Romeyne in every way worthy of him, and you know that he loves you. If you did tell him that

miserable story, he could only pity you. Do you want to be pitied ? ’

Those last unanswerable words brought the debate to an end. From that moment the subject was dropped.

There was still one other person among the guests at the ball who was waking in the small hours of the morning. Father Benwell, wrapped comfortably in his dressing gown, was too hard at work on his correspondence to think of his bed.

With one exception, all the letters that he had written thus far were closed, directed, and stamped for the post. The letter that he kept open he was now engaged in reconsidering and correcting. It was addressed as usual to the Secretary of the Order at Rome ; and, when it had undergone the final revision, it contained these lines :—

My last letter informed you of Romaine's return to London and to Miss Eyrecourt. Let me entreat our reverend brethren to preserve perfect tranquillity of mind, in spite of this circumstance. The owner of Vange Abbey is not married yet. If patience and perseverance on my part win their fair reward, Miss Eyrecourt shall never be his wife.

But let me not conceal the truth. In the uncertain future that lies before us, I have no one to depend on but myself. Penrose is no longer to be trusted: and the exertions of the agent to whom I committed my inquiries are exertions that have failed.

I will dispose of the case of Penrose first.

The zeal with which this young man has undertaken the work of conversion entrusted to him has, I regret to say, not

been fired by devotion to the interests of the Church, but by a dog-like affection for Romaine. Without waiting for my permission, Penrose has revealed himself in his true character as a priest. And, more than this, he has not only refused to observe the proceedings of Romaine and Miss Eyrecourt—he has deliberately closed his ears to the confidence which Romaine wished to repose in him, on the ground that I might have ordered him to repeat that confidence to me.

To what use can we put this poor fellow's ungovernable sense of honour and gratitude? Under present circumstances, he is clearly of little use to us. I have therefore given him time to think. That is to say, I have not opposed his leaving London, to assist in the spiritual care of a country district. It will be a question for the future, whether we

may not turn his enthusiasm to good account in a foreign mission. However, as it is always possible that his influence may still be of use to us, I venture to suggest keeping him within our reach until Romaine's conversion has actually taken place. Don't suppose that the present separation between them is final; I will answer for their meeting again.

I may now proceed to the failure of my agent, and to the course of action that I have adopted in consequence.

The investigations appear to have definitely broken down at the seaside village of Clovelly, in the neighbourhood of Mr. Winterfield's country seat. Knowing that I could depend upon the information which associated this gentleman with Miss Eyrecourt, under compromising circumstances of

some sort, I decided on seeing Mr. Winterfield, and judging for myself.

The agent's report informed me that the person who had finally baffled his inquiries was an aged Catholic priest, long resident at Clovelly. His name is Newbliss, and he is much respected among the Catholic gentry in that part of Devonshire. After due consideration, I obtained a letter of introduction to my reverend colleague, and travelled to Clovelly—telling my friends here that I was taking a little holiday, in the interests of my health.

I found Father Newbliss a venerable and reticent son of the Church—with one weak point, however, to work on, which was entirely beyond the reach of the otherwise astute person charged with my inquiries. My reverend friend is a scholar, and is

inordinately proud of his learning. I am a scholar too. In that capacity I first found my way to his sympathies, and then gently encouraged his pride. The result will appear in certain discoveries, which I number as follows :—

1. The events which connect Mr. Winterfield with Miss Eyrecourt happened about two years since, and had their beginning at Beaupark House.

2. At this period, Miss Eyrecourt and her mother were staying at Beaupark House. The general impression in the neighbourhood was that Mr. Winterfield and Miss Eyrecourt were engaged to be married.

3. Not long afterwards, Miss Eyrecourt and her mother surprised the neighbourhood by suddenly leaving Beaupark House. Their destination was supposed to be London.



4. Mr. Winterfield himself next left his country seat for the Continent. His exact destination was not mentioned to anyone. The steward, soon afterwards, dismissed all the servants, and the house was left empty for more than a year.

5. At the end of that time Mr. Winterfield returned alone to Beaupark House, and told nobody how, or where, he had passed the long interval of his absence.

6. Mr. Winterfield remains, to the present day, an unmarried man.

Having arrived at these preliminary discoveries, it was time to try what I could make of Mr. Winterfield next.

Among the other good things which this gentleman has inherited is a magnificent library collected by his father. That one learned man should take another learned

man to see the books was a perfectly natural proceeding. My introduction to the master of the house followed my introduction to the library almost as a matter of course.

I am about to surprise you, as I was myself surprised. In all my long experience, Mr. Winterfield is, I think, the most fascinating person I ever met with. Genial, unassuming manners, a prepossessing personal appearance, a sweet temper, a quaint humour delightfully accompanied by natural refinement—such are the characteristic qualities of the man from whom I myself saw Miss Eyrecourt (accidentally meeting him in public) recoil with dismay and disgust! I is absolutely impossible to look at him, and to believe him to be capable of a cruel or dishonourable action. I never was so puzzled in my life.

You may be inclined to think that I am misled by a false impression, derived from the gratifying welcome that I received as a friend of Father Newbliss. I will not appeal to my knowledge of human nature—I will refer to the unanswerable evidence of Mr. Winterfield's poorer neighbours. Wherever I went, in the village or out of it, if I mentioned his name, I produced a universal outburst of admiration and gratitude. 'There never was such a friend to poor people, and there never can be such another to the end of the world.' Such was a fisherman's description of him; and the one cry of all the men and women near us answered, 'That's the truth!'

And yet there is something wrong—for this plain reason, that there is something to

be concealed in the past lives of Mr. Winterfield and Miss Eyrecourt.

Under these perplexing circumstances, what use have I made of my opportunities? I am going to surprise you again—I have mentioned Romaine's name to Mr. Winterfield; and I have ascertained that they are, so far, perfect strangers to one another—and that is all.

The little incident of mentioning Romaine arose out of my examination of the library. I discovered certain old volumes, which may one day be of use to him, if he continues his contemplated work on the Origin of Religions. Hearing me express myself to this effect, Mr. Winterfield replied with the readiest kindness.

‘I can't compare myself to my excellent Father,’ he said; ‘but I have at least in-

herited his respect for the writers of books. My library is a treasure which I hold in trust for the interests of literature. Pray say so, from me, to your friend Mr. Romaine.'

And what does this amount to?—you will ask. My reverend friend, it offers me an opportunity, in the future, of bringing Romaine and Winterfield together. Do you see the complications which may ensue? If I can put no other difficulty in Miss Eyrecourt's way, I think there is fruitful promise of a scandal of some kind arising out of the introduction to each other of those two men. You will agree with me that a scandal may prove a valuable obstacle in the way of a marriage.

Mr. Winterfield has kindly invited me to call on him when he is next in London. I

may then have opportunities of putting questions which I could not venture to ask on a short acquaintance.

In the meantime, I have obtained another introduction since my return to town. I have been presented to Miss Eyrecourt's mother, and I am invited to drink tea with her on Wednesday. My next letter may tell you—what Penrose ought to have discovered—whether Romaine has been already entrapped into a marriage engagement or not.

Farewell for the present. Remind the reverend Fathers, with my respects, that I possess one of the valuable qualities of an Englishman—I never know when I am beaten.

THE STORY.

*BOOK THE THIRD.*





## CHAPTER I.

## THE HONEYMOON.

More than six weeks had passed. The wedded lovers were still enjoying their honeymoon at Vange Abbey.

Some offence had been given, not only to Mrs. Eyrecourt, but to friends of her way of thinking, by the strictly private manner in which the marriage had been celebrated. The event took everybody by surprise when the customary advertisement appeared in the newspapers. Foreseeing the unfavourable impression that might be produced in some quarters, Stella had pleaded for a timely retreat to the seclusion of Romaine's country

house. The will of the bride being, as usual, the bridegroom's law, to Vange they retired accordingly.

On one lovely moonlight night, early in July, Mrs. Romaine left her husband on the Belvidere, described in Major Hynd's narrative, to give the housekeeper certain instructions relating to the affairs of the household. Half an hour later, as she was about to ascend again to the top of the house, one of the servants informed her that 'the master had just left the Belvidere, and had gone into his study.'

Crossing the inner hall, on her way to the study, Stella noticed an unopened letter, addressed to Romaine, lying on a table in a corner. He had probably laid it aside and forgotten it. She entered his room with the letter in her hand.

The only light was a reading lamp, with the shade so lowered that the corners of the study were left in obscurity. In one of these corners Romaine was dimly visible, sitting with his head sunk on his breast. He never moved when Stella opened the door. At first she thought he might be asleep.

‘Do I disturb you, Lewis?’ she asked softly.

‘No, my dear.’

There was a change in the tone of his voice, which his wife’s quick ear detected. ‘I am afraid you are not well,’ she said anxiously.

‘I am a little tired after our long ride to-day. Do you want to go back to the Belvidere?’ -

‘Not without you. Shall I leave you to rest here?’

He seemed not to hear the question. There he sat, with his head hanging down, the shadowy counterfeit of an old man. In her anxiety, Stella approached him, and put her hand caressingly on his head. It was burning hot. 'Oh!' she cried, 'you *are* ill, and you are trying to hide it from me.'

He put his arm round her waist, and made her sit on his knee. 'Nothing is the matter with me,' he said, with an uneasy laugh. 'What have you got in your hand? A letter?'

'Yes. Addressed to you, and not opened yet.'

He took it out of her hand, and threw it carelessly on a sofa near him. 'Never mind that now! Let us talk.' He paused, and kissed her, before he went on. 'My darling, I think you must be getting tired of Vange?'

‘Oh, no! I can be happy anywhere with you—and especially at Vange. You don’t know how this noble old house interests me, and how I admire the glorious country all round it.’

He was not convinced. ‘Vange is very dull,’ he said, obstinately; ‘and your friends will be wanting to see you. Have you heard from your mother lately?’

‘No. I am surprised she has not written.’

‘She has not forgiven us for getting married so quietly,’ he went on. ‘We had better go back to London and make our peace with her. Don’t you want to see the house my aunt left me at Highgate?’

Stella sighed. The society of the man she loved was society enough for her. Was he getting tired of his wife already? ‘I will go with you wherever you like.’ She said

those words in tones of sad submission, and gently got up from his knee.

He rose also, and took from the sofa the letter which he had thrown on it. 'Let us see what our friends say,' he resumed. 'The address is in Loring's handwriting.'

As he approached the table on which the lamp was burning, she noticed that he moved with a languor that was new in her experience of him. He sat down and opened the letter. She watched him with an anxiety which had now become intensified to suspicion. The shade of the lamp still prevented her from seeing his face plainly. 'Just what I told you,' he said; 'the Lorings want to know when they are to see us in London; and your mother says she "feels like that character in Shakespeare who was cut by his own daughters." Read it.'

He handed her the letter. In taking it, she contrived to touch the lamp shade, as if by accident, and tilted it so that the full flow of the light fell on him. He started back—but not before she had seen the ghastly pallor on his face. She had not only heard it from Lady Loring, she knew from his own unreserved confession to her what that startling change really meant. In an instant she was on her knees at his feet. ‘Oh, my darling,’ she cried, ‘it was cruel to keep *that* secret from your wife! You have heard it again!’

She was too irresistibly beautiful, at that moment, to be reproved. He gently raised her from the floor—and owned the truth.

‘Yes,’ he said; ‘I heard it after you left me on the Belvidere—just as I heard it on another moonlight night, when Major Hynd

was here with me. Our return to this house is perhaps the cause. I don't complain; I have had a long release.'

She threw her arms round his neck. 'We will leave Vange to-morrow,' she said.

It was firmly spoken. But her heart sank, as the words passed her lips. Vange Abbey had been the scene of the most unalloyed happiness in her life. What destiny was waiting for her when she returned to London?



## CHAPTER II.

## EVENTS AT TEN ACRES.

THERE was no obstacle to the speedy departure of Romaine and his wife from Vange Abbey. The villa at Highgate—called Ten Acres Lodge, in allusion to the measurement of the grounds surrounding the house—had been kept in perfect order by the servants of the late Lady Berrick, now in the employment of her nephew.

On the morning after their arrival at the villa, Stella sent a note to her mother. The same afternoon, Mrs. Eyrecourt arrived at Ten Acres—on her way to a garden party. Finding the house, to her great relief, a

modern building, supplied with all the newest comforts and luxuries, she at once began to plan a grand party, in celebration of the return of the bride and bridegroom.

‘I don’t wish to praise myself,’ Mrs. Eyrecourt said; ‘but if ever there was a forgiving woman, I am that person. We will say no more, Stella, about your truly contemptible wedding—five people altogether, including ourselves and the Lorings. A grand ball will set you right with society, and that is the one thing needful. Tea and coffee, my dear Romayne, in your study; Coote’s quadrille band; the supper from Gunter’s; the grounds illuminated with coloured lamps; Tyrolese singers among the trees, relieved by military music—and, if there *are* any African or other savages now in London, there is room enough in these

charming grounds for encampments, dances, squaws, scalps, and all the rest of it, to end in a blaze of fireworks.'

A sudden fit of coughing seized her, and stopped the further enumeration of attractions at the contemplated ball. Stella had observed that her mother looked unusually worn and haggard, through the disguises of paint and powder. This was not an uncommon result of Mrs. Eyrecourt's devotion to the demands of society; but the cough was something new, as a symptom of exhaustion.

'I am afraid, mamma, you have been over-exerting yourself,' said Stella. 'You go to too many parties.'

'Nothing of the sort, my dear; I am as strong as a horse. The other night, I was waiting for the carriage in a draught (one of the most perfect private concerts of the

season, ending with a delightfully naughty little French play)—and I caught a slight cold. A glass of water is all I want. Thank you. Romaine, you are looking shockingly serious and severe ; our ball will cheer you. If you would only make a bonfire of all those horrid books, you don't know how it would improve your spirits. Dearest Stella, I will come and lunch here to-morrow—you are within such a nice easy drive from town—and I'll bring my visiting-book, and settle about the invitations and the day. Oh, dear me, how late it is. I have nearly an hour's drive before I get to my garden party. Good-bye, my turtle doves, good-bye.'

She was stopped, on the way to her carriage, by another fit of coughing. But she still persisted in making light of it. 'I'm as strong as a horse,' she repeated, as soon

as she could speak—and skipped into the carriage like a young girl.

‘Your mother is killing herself,’ said Romaine.

‘If I could persuade her to stay with us a little while,’ Stella suggested, ‘the rest and quiet might do wonders for her. Would you object to it, Lewis?’

‘My darling, I object to nothing—except giving a ball and burning my books. If your mother will yield on these two points, my house is entirely at her disposal.’

He spoke playfully—he looked his best, since he had separated himself from the painful associations that were now connected with Vange Abbey. Had ‘the torment of the Voice’ been left far away in Yorkshire? Stella shrank from approaching the subject in her husband’s presence, knowing that it

must remind him of the fatal duel. To her surprise, Romaine himself referred to the General's family.

‘I have written to Hynd,’ he began;  
‘Do you mind his dining with us to-day?’

‘Of course not!’

‘I want to hear if he has anything to tell me—about those French ladies. He undertook to see them, in your absence, and to ascertain—’ He was unable to overcome his reluctance to pronounce the next words. Stella was quick to understand what he meant. She finished the sentence for him.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I wanted to hear how the boy is getting on, and if there is any hope of curing him. Is it——’ he trembled as he put the question—‘Is it hereditary madness?’

Feeling the serious importance of conceal-

ing the truth, Stella only replied that she had hesitated to ask if there was a taint of madness in the family. 'I suppose,' she added, 'you would not like to see the boy, and judge of his chances of recovery for yourself?'

'You suppose?' he burst out, with sudden anger. 'You might be sure. The bare idea of seeing him turns me cold. Oh, when shall I forget! when shall I forget! Who spoke of him first?' he said, with renewed irritability, after a moment of silence. 'You or I?'

'It was my fault; love—he is so harmless and so gentle, and he has such a sweet face—I thought it might soothe you to see him. Forgive me; we will never speak of him again. Have you any notes for me to copy? You know, Lewis, I am your secretary now.'

So she led Romaine away to his study and his books. When Major Hynd arrived, she contrived to be the first to see him. 'Say as little as possible about the General's widow and her son,' she whispered.

The Major understood her. 'Don't be uneasy, Mrs. Romaine,' he answered. 'I know your husband well enough to know what you mean. Besides, the news I bring is good news.'

Romaine came in before he could speak more particularly. When the servants had left the room, after dinner, the Major made his report.

'I am going to agreeably surprise you,' he began. 'All responsibility towards the General's family is taken off our hands. The ladies are on their way back to France.'

Stella was instantly reminded of one of



the melancholy incidents associated with her visit to Camp's Hill. 'Madame Marillac spoke of a brother of hers who disapproved of the marriage,' she said. 'Has he forgiven her?'

'That is exactly what he has done, Mrs. Romaine. Naturally enough, he felt the disgrace of his sister's marriage to such a man as the General. Only the other day he heard for the first time that she was a widow—and he at once travelled to England. I bade them good-bye yesterday—most happily reunited—on their journey home again. Ah, I thought you would be glad, Mrs. Romaine, to hear that the poor widow's troubles are over. Her brother is rich enough to place them all in easy circumstances—he is as good a fellow as ever lived.'

‘Have you seen him?’ Stella asked eagerly.

‘I have been with him to the asylum.’

‘Does the boy go back to France?’

‘No. We took the place by surprise, and saw for ourselves how well conducted it was. The boy has taken a strong liking to the proprietor—a bright, cheerful old man, who is teaching him some of our English games, and has given him a pony to ride on. He burst out crying, poor creature, at the idea of going away—and his mother burst out crying at the idea of leaving him. It was a melancholy scene. You know what a good mother is—no sacrifice is too great for her. The boy stays at the asylum, on the chance that his healthier and happier life there may help to cure him. By-the-way, Romaine, his uncle desires me to thank you——’

‘Hynd! you didn’t tell the uncle my name?’

‘Don’t alarm yourself. He is a gentleman, and when I told him I was pledged to secrecy, he made but one inquiry—he asked if you were a rich man. I told him you had eighteen thousand a year.’

‘Well?’

‘Well, he set that matter right between us with perfect taste. He said, “I cannot presume to offer repayment to a person so wealthy. We gratefully accept our obligation to our kind unknown friend. For the future, however, my nephew’s expenses must be paid from my purse.” Of course I could only agree to that. From time to time the mother is to hear, and I am to hear, how the boy goes on. Or, if you like, Romaine—now that the General’s family

have left England—I don't see why the proprietor might not make his report directly to yourself.'

'No!' Romaine rejoined, positively.  
'Let things remain as they are.'

'Very well. I can send you any letters that I may receive from the asylum. Will you give us some music, Mrs. Romaine? Not to-night? Then let us go to the billiard-room; and as I am the worst of bad players, I will ask you to help me to beat your accomplished husband.'

On the afternoon of the next day, Mrs. Eyrecourt's maid arrived at Ten Acres with a note from her mistress.

'Dearest Stella,—Matilda must bring you my excuses for to-day. I don't in the least understand it, but I seem to have turned lazy. It is most ridiculous—I really cannot

get out of bed. Perhaps I did do just a little too much yesterday. The opera after the garden party, and a ball after the opera, and this tiresome cough all night after the ball. Quite a series, isn't it? Make my apologies to our dear dismal Romaine—and if you drive out this afternoon, come and have a chat with me. Your affectionate mother, Emily Eyrecourt. P.S.—You know what a fidget Matilda is. If she talks about me, don't believe a word she says to you.'

Stella turned to the maid with a sinking heart. 'Is my mother very ill?' she asked.

'So ill, ma'am, that I begged and prayed her to let me send for a doctor. You know what my mistress is. If you would please to use your influence——'

'I will order the carriage instantly, and take you back with me.'

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husband. Even under the influence of opiates, Mrs. Eyrecourt was still drowsily equal to herself. 'You are a fidget, my dear, and Matilda is a fidget—I can't have two of you at my bedside. Good-night.' Stella stooped over her and kissed her. She whispered, 'Three weeks' notice, remember, for the party!'

By the next evening the malady had assumed so formidable an aspect, that the doctor had his doubts of the patient's chance of recovery. With her husband's full approval, Stella remained night and day at her mother's bedside.

Thus, in little more than a month from the day of his marriage, Romaine was, for the time, a lonely man again.

The illness of Mrs. Eyrecourt was unexpectedly prolonged. There were intervals,

during which her vigorous constitution rallied, and resisted the progress of the disease. On these occasions, Stella was able to return to her husband for a few hours—subject always to a message which recalled her to her mother when the chances of life or death appeared to be equally balanced. Romaine's one resource was in his books and his pen. For the first time since his union with Stella he opened the portfolios in which Penrose had collected the first introductory chapters of his historical work. Almost at every page the familiar handwriting of his secretary and friend met his view. It was a new trial to his resolution to be working alone; never had he felt the absence of Penrose as he felt it now. He missed the familiar face, the quiet pleasant voice, and, more than both, the ever-welcome sympathy with his work. Stella had

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done all that a wife could do to fill the vacant place ; and her husband's fondness had accepted the effort as adding another charm to the lovely creature who had opened a new life to him. But where is the woman who can intimately associate herself with the hard brain-work of a man devoted to an absorbing intellectual pursuit? She can love him, admire him, serve him, believe in him beyond all other men—but (in spite of exceptions which only prove the rule) she is out of her place when she enters the study while the pen is in his hand. More than once, when he was at work, Romaine closed the page bitterly ; the sad thought came to him, 'Oh, if I only had Penrose here !' Even other friends were not available as a resource in the solitary evening hours. Lord Loring was absorbed in social and political engagements. And

Major Hynd—true to the principle of getting away as often as possible from his disagreeable wife and his ugly children—had once more left London.

One day, while Mrs. Eyrecourt still lay between life and death, Romaine found his historical labours suspended by the want of a certain volume which it was absolutely necessary to consult. He had mislaid the references written for him by Penrose, and he was at a loss to remember whether the book was in the British Museum, in the Bodleian Library, or in the Bibliothèque at Paris. In this emergency a letter to his former secretary would furnish him with the information that he required. But he was ignorant of Penrose's present address. The Loring might possibly know it—so to the Loring he resolved to apply.

**CHAPTER III.****FATHER BENWELL AND THE BOOK.**

ROMAYNE's first errand in London was to see his wife, and to make inquiries at Mrs. Eyrecourt's house. The report was more favourable than usual. Stella whispered, as she kissed him, 'I shall soon come back to you, I hope!'

Leaving the horses to rest for awhile, he proceeded to Lord Loring's residence on foot. As he crossed a street in the neighbourhood, he was nearly run over by a cab, carrying a gentleman and his luggage. The gentleman was Mr. Winterfield, on his way to Derwent's Hotel.

Lady Loring very kindly searched her card basket, as the readiest means of assisting Romaine. Penrose had left his card, on his departure from London, but no address was written on it. Lord Loring, unable himself to give the required information, suggested the right person to consult.

‘Father Benwell will be here later in the day,’ he said. ‘If you will write to Penrose at once, he will add the address. Are you sure, before the letter goes, that the book you want is not in my library?’

‘I think not,’ Romaine answered; ‘but I will write down the title, and leave it here with my letter.’

The same evening he received a polite note from Father Benwell, informing him that the letter was forwarded, and that the book he wanted was not in Lord Loring’s

library. 'If there should be any delay or difficulty in obtaining this rare volume,' the priest added, 'I only wait the expression of your wishes, to borrow it from the library of a friend of mine, residing in the country.'

By return of post the answer, affectionately and gratefully written, arrived from Penrose. He regretted that he was not able to assist Romaine personally. But it was out of his power (in plain words, he had been expressly forbidden by Father Benwell) to leave the service on which he was then engaged. In reference to the book that was wanted, it was quite likely that a search in the catalogues of the British Museum might discover it. He had only met with it himself in the National Library at Paris.

This information led Romaine to London again, immediately. For the first time he

called at Father Benwell's lodgings. The priest was at home, expecting the visit. His welcome was the perfection of unassuming politeness. He asked for the last news of 'poor Mrs. Eyrecourt's health,' with the sympathy of a true friend.

'I had the honour of drinking tea with Mrs. Eyrecourt, some little time since,' he said. 'Her flow of conversation was never more delightful—it seemed impossible to associate the idea of illness with so bright a creature. And how well she kept the secret of your contemplated marriage! May I offer my humble congratulations and good wishes?'

Romayne thought it needless to say that Mrs. Eyrecourt had not been trusted with the secret until the wedding day was close at hand. 'My wife and I agreed in wishing

to be married as quietly as possible,' he answered, after making the customary acknowledgments.

'And Mrs. Romaine?' pursued Father Benwell. 'This is a sad trial for her. She is in attendance on her mother, I suppose?'

'In constant attendance; I am quite alone now. To change the subject, may I ask you to look at the reply which I have received from Penrose? It is my excuse for troubling you with this visit.'

Father Benwell read the letter with the closest attention. In spite of his habitual self-control, his vigilant eyes brightened as he handed it back.

Thus far, the priest's well-planned scheme (like Mr. Bitrake's clever inquiries) had failed. He had not even entrapped

Mrs. Eyrecourt into revealing the marriage engagement. Her unconquerable small-talk had foiled him at every point. Even when he had deliberately kept his seat after the other guests at the tea-table had taken their departure, she rose with the most imperturbable coolness, and left him. 'I have a dinner and two parties to-night, and this is just the time when I take my little restorative nap. Forgive me—and do come again!' When he sent the fatal announcement of the marriage to Rome, he had been obliged to confess that he was indebted for the discovery to the newspaper. He had accepted the humiliation; he had accepted the defeat—but he was not beaten yet. 'I counted on Romaine's weakness, and Miss Eyrecourt counted on Romaine's weakness; and Miss Eyrecourt has won. So let it be.



My turn will come.' In that manner he had reconciled himself to his position. And now—he knew it when he handed back the letter to Romaine—his turn *had* come!

'You can hardly go to Paris to consult the book,' he said, 'in the present state of Mrs. Eyrecourt's health.'

'Certainly not!'

'Perhaps you will send somebody to search the catalogue at the British Museum?'

'I should have done that already, Father Benwell, but for the very kind allusion in your note to your friend in the country. Even if the book is in the Museum Library, I shall be obliged to go to the Reading Room to get my information. It would be far more convenient to me to have the volume at home to consult, if

you think your friend will trust me with it.'

'I am certain he will trust you with it. My friend is Mr. Winterfield, of Beaupark House, North Devon. Perhaps you may have heard of him?'

'No; the name is quite new to me.'

'Then come and see the man himself. He is now in London—and I am entirely at your service.'

In half an hour more, Romaine was presented to a well-bred amiable gentleman in the prime of life; smoking, and reading the newspaper. The bowl of his long pipe rested on the floor, on one side of him, and a handsome red and white spaniel reposed on the other. Before his visitors had been two minutes in the room, he understood the motive which had brought

them to consult him, and sent for a telegraphic form.

‘My steward will find the book and forward it to your address by passenger train this afternoon,’ he said. ‘I will tell him to put my printed catalogue of the library into the parcel, in case I have any other books which may be of use to you.’

With those words, he despatched the telegram to the office. Romaine attempted to make his acknowledgments. Mr. Winterfield would hear no acknowledgments.

‘My dear sir,’ he said, with a smile that brightened his whole face, ‘you are engaged in writing a great historical work; and I am an obscure country gentleman, who is lucky enough to associate himself with the production of a new book. How do you know that I am not looking forward to a

complimentary line in the preface? I am the obliged person, not you. Pray consider me as a handy little boy who runs on errands for the Muse of History. Do you smoke?’

Not even tobacco would soothe Romaine’s wasted and irritable nerves. Father Benwell—‘all things to all men’—cheerfully accepted a cigar from the box on the table.

‘Father Benwell possesses all the social virtues,’ Mr. Winterfield ran on. ‘He shall have his coffee, and the largest sugar-basin that the hotel can produce. I can quite understand that your literary labours have tried your nerves,’ he said to Romaine, when he had ordered the coffee. ‘The mere title of your work overwhelms an idle man like me. “The Origin of Religions”—’

what an immense subject! How far must we look back to find out the first worshippers of the human family? Where are the hieroglyphics, Mr. Romaine, that will give you the earliest information? In the unknown centre of Africa, or among the ruined cities of Yucatan? My own idea, as an ignorant man, is that the first of all forms of worship must have been the worship of the sun. Don't be shocked, Father Benwell—I confess I have a certain sympathy with sun-worship. In the East especially, the rising of the sun is surely the grandest of all objects—the visible symbol of a beneficent Deity, who gives life, warmth, and light to the world of his creation.'

'Very grand, no doubt,' remarked Father Benwell, sweetening his coffee. 'But not to be compared with the noble sight at Rome,

when the Pope blesses the Christian world from the balcony of St. Peter's.'

'So much for professional feeling!' said Mr. Winterfield. 'But, surely, something depends on what sort of man the Pope is. If we had lived in the time of Alexander the Sixth, would you have called *him* a part of that noble sight?'

'Certainly—at a proper distance,' Father Benwell briskly replied. 'Ah, you heretics only know the worst side of that most unhappy pontiff! Mr. Winterfield, we have every reason to believe that he felt (privately) the truest remorse.'

'I should require very good evidence to persuade me of it.'

This touched Romaine on a sad side of his own personal experience. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'you don't believe in remorse.'

‘Pardon me,’ Mr. Winterfield rejoined, ‘I only distinguish between false remorse and true remorse. We will say no more of Alexander the Sixth, Father Benwell. If we want an illustration, I will supply it, and give no offence. True remorse depends, to my mind, on a man’s accurate knowledge of his own motives—far from a common knowledge, in my experience. Say, for instance, that I have committed some serious offence——’

Romayne could not resist interrupting him. ‘Say you have killed one of your fellow-creatures,’ he suggested.

‘Very well. If I know that I really meant to kill him, for some vile purpose of my own; and if (which by no means always follows) I am really capable of feeling the enormity of my own crime—that is, as I

think, true remorse. Murderer as I am, I have, in that case, some moral worth still left in me. But, if I did *not* mean to kill the man—if his death was my misfortune as well as his—and if (as frequently happens) I am nevertheless troubled by remorse, the true cause lies in my own inability fairly to realise my own motives—before I look to results. I am the ignorant victim of false remorse; and if I will only ask myself boldly what has blinded me to the true state of the case, I shall find the mischief due to that misdirected appreciation of my own importance which is nothing but egotism in disguise.'

'I entirely agree with you,' said Father Benwell; 'I have had occasion to say the same thing in the confessional.'



Mr. Winterfield looked at his dog, and changed the subject. 'Do you like dogs, Mr. Romaine?' he asked. 'I see my spaniel's eyes saying that he likes you, and his tail begging you to take some notice of him.'

Romaine caressed the dog rather absently.

His new friend had unconsciously presented to him a new view of the darker aspect of his own life. Winterfield's refined pleasant manners, his generous readiness in placing the treasures of his library at a stranger's disposal, had already appealed irresistibly to Romaine's sensitive nature. The favourable impression was now greatly strengthened by the briefly bold treatment which he had just heard of a subject in which he was seriously interested. 'I must

see more of this man,' was his thought, as he patted the companionable spaniel.

Father Benwell's trained observation followed the vivid changes of expression on Romaine's face, and marked the eager look in his eyes, as he lifted his head from the dog to the dog's master. The priest saw his opportunity, and took it.

'Do you remain long at Ten Acres Lodge?' he said to Romaine.

'I hardly know as yet. We have no other plans at present.'

'You inherit the place, I think, from your late aunt, Lady Berrick?'

'Yes.'

The tone of the reply was not encouraging; Romaine felt no interest in talking of Ten Acres Lodge. Father Benwell persisted.

‘I was told by Mrs. Eyrecourt,’ he went on, ‘that Lady Berrick had some fine pictures. Are they still at the Lodge?’

‘Certainly. I couldn’t live in a house without pictures.’

Father Benwell looked at Winterfield. ‘Another taste in common between you and Mr. Romaine,’ he said, ‘besides your liking for dogs.’

This at once produced the desired result. Romaine eagerly invited Winterfield to see his pictures. ‘There are not many of them,’ he said. ‘But they are really worth looking at. When will you come?’

‘The sooner the better,’ Winterfield answered, cordially. ‘Will to-morrow do—by the noonday light?’

‘Whenever you please. Your time is mine.’

Among his other accomplishments, Father Benwell was a chess-player. If his thoughts at that moment had been expressed in language, they would have said, 'Check to the queen.'

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE END OF THE HONEYMOON.

ON the next morning, Winterfield arrived alone at Romaine's house.

Having been included, as a matter of course, in the invitation to see the pictures, Father Benwell had made an excuse, and had asked leave to defer the proposed visit. From his point of view, he had nothing further to gain by being present at a second meeting between the two men—in the absence of Stella. He had it, on Romaine's own authority, that she was in constant attendance on her mother, and that her husband was alone. 'Either Mrs. Eyrecourt

will get better, or she will die,' Father Benwell reasoned. 'I shall make constant inquiries after her health, and, in either case, I shall know when Mrs. Romaine returns to Ten Acres Lodge. After that domestic event, the next time Mr. Winterfield visits Mr. Romaine, I shall go and see the pictures.'

It is one of the defects of a super-subtle intellect to trust too implicitly to calculation, and to leave nothing to chance. Once or twice already Father Benwell had been (in the popular phrase) a little too clever—and chance had thrown him out. As events happened, chance was destined to throw him out once more.

Of the most modest pretensions, in regard to numbers and size, the pictures collected by the late Lady Berrick were

masterly works of modern art. With few exceptions, they had been produced by the matchless English landscape painters of half a century since. There was no formal gallery here. The pictures were so few that they could be hung in excellent lights in the different living-rooms of the villa. Turner, Constable, Collins, Danby, Callcott, Linnell—the master of Beaupark House passed from one to the other with the enjoyment of a man who thoroughly appreciated the truest and finest landscape art that the world has yet seen.

‘You had better not have asked me here,’ he said to Romaine, in his quaintly good-humoured way. ‘I can’t part with those pictures when I say good-bye to-day. You will find me calling here again and again, till you are perfectly sick of me.

Look at this sea piece. 'Who thinks of the brushes and palette of *that* painter? There, truth to nature and poetical feeling go hand in hand together. It is absolutely lovely—I could kiss that picture.'

They were in Romaine's study when this odd outburst of enthusiasm escaped Winterfield. He happened to look towards the writing-table next. Some pages of manuscript, blotted and interlined with corrections, at once attracted his attention.

'Is that the forthcoming history?' he asked. 'You are not one of the authors who perform the process of correction mentally—you revise and improve with the pen in your hand.'

Romaine looked at him in surprise. 'I suspect, Mr. Winterfield, you have used your pen for other purposes than writing letters.'



‘No, indeed ; you pay me an undeserved compliment. When you come to see me in Devonshire, I can show you some manuscripts, and corrected proofs, left by our great writers, collected by my father. My knowledge of the secrets of the craft has been gained by examining those literary treasures. If the public only knew that every writer worthy of the name is the severest critic of his own book before it ever gets into the hands of the reviewers, how surprised they would be ! The man who has worked in the full fervour of composition yesterday is the same man who sits in severe and merciless judgment to-day on what he has himself produced. What a fascination there must be in the Art which exacts and receives such double labour as this !’

Romayne thought—not unkindly—of his wife. Stella had once asked him how long a time he was usually occupied in writing one page. The reply had filled her with pity and wonder. ‘Why do you take all that trouble?’ she had gently remonstrated. ‘It would be just the same to the people, darling, if you did it in half the time.’

By way of changing the topic, Romayne led his visitor into another room. ‘I have a picture here,’ he said, ‘which belongs to a newer school of painting. You have been talking of hard work in one Art; there it is in another.’

‘Yes,’ said Winterfield; ‘there it is—the misdirected hard work, which has been guided by no critical faculty, and which doesn’t know where to stop. I try to admire it; and I end in pitying the poor

artist. Look at that leafless felled tree, in the middle distance. Every little twig, on the smallest branch, is conscientiously painted—and the result is like a coloured photograph. You don't look at a landscape as a series of separate parts; you don't discover every twig on a tree; you see the whole in Nature, and you want to see the whole in a picture. That canvas presents a triumph of patience and pains, produced exactly as a piece of embroidery is produced, all in little separate bits, worked with the same mechanically complete care. I turn away from it to your shrubbery there, with an ungrateful sense of relief.'

He walked to the window as he spoke. It looked out on the grounds in front of the house. At the same moment the noise of rolling wheels became audible on the drive.

An open carriage appeared at the turn in the road. Winterfield called Romaine to the window. 'A visitor,' he began—and suddenly drew back, without saying a word more.

Romaine looked out, and recognised his wife.

'Excuse me for one moment,' he said, 'it is Mrs. Romaine.'

On that morning an improvement in the fluctuating state of Mrs. Eyrecourt's health had given Stella another of those opportunities of passing an hour or two with her husband, which she so highly prized. Romaine withdrew, to meet her at the door—too hurriedly to notice Winterfield standing, in the corner to which he had retreated, like a man petrified.

Stella had got out of the carriage, when

her husband reached the porch. She ascended the few steps that led to the hall as slowly and painfully as if she had been an infirm old woman. The delicately-tinted colour in her face had faded to an ashy white. She had seen Winterfield at the window.

For the moment, Romaine looked at her in speechless consternation. He led her into the nearest room that opened out of the hall, and took her in his arms. 'My love, this nursing of your mother has completely broken you down!' he said, with the tenderest pity for her. 'If you won't think of yourself, you must think of me. For my sake remain here, and take the rest that you need. I will be a tyrant, Stella, for the first time; I won't let you go back.'

She roused herself, and tried to smile—and hid the sad result from him in a kiss. ‘I do feel the anxiety and fatigue,’ she said. ‘But my mother is really improving; and, if it only continues, the blessed sense of relief will make me strong again.’ She paused, and roused all her courage, in anticipation of the next words—so trivial and so terrible—that must, sooner or later, be pronounced. ‘You have a visitor,’ she said.

‘Did you see him at the window? A really delightful man—I know you will like him. Under any other circumstances, I should have introduced him. You are not well enough to see strangers to-day.’

She was too determined to prevent Winterfield from ever entering the house again to shrink from the meeting. ‘I am not so

ill as you think, Lewis,' she said bravely. 'When you go to your new friend, I will go with you. I am a little tired—that's all.'

Romayne looked at her anxiously. 'Let me get you a glass of wine,' he said.

She consented—she really felt the need of it. As he turned away to ring the bell, she put the question which had been in her mind from the moment when she had seen Winterfield.

'How did you become acquainted with this gentleman?'

'Through Father Benwell.'

She was not surprised by the answer—her suspicion of the priest had remained in her mind from the night of Lady Loring's ball. The future of her married life depended on her capacity to check the growing

intimacy between the two men. In that conviction she found the courage to face Winterfield.

How should she meet him? The impulse of the moment pointed to the shortest way out of the dreadful position in which she was placed—it was to treat him like a stranger. She drank her glass of wine, and took Romayne's arm. 'We mustn't keep your friend waiting any longer,' she resumed. 'Come!'

As they crossed the hall, she looked suspiciously towards the house-door. Had he taken the opportunity of leaving the villa? At any other time she would have remembered that the plainest laws of good breeding compelled him to wait for Romayne's return. His own knowledge of the world would tell him that an act of gross rudeness,



committed by a well-bred man, would inevitably excite suspicion of some unworthy motive—and might, perhaps, connect that motive with her unexpected appearance at the house. Romaine opened the door, and they entered the room together.

‘Mr. Winterfield, let me introduce you to Mrs. Romaine.’

They bowed to each other ; they spoke the conventional words proper to the occasion—but the effort that it cost them showed itself. Romaine perceived an unusual formality in his wife’s manner, and a strange disappearance of Winterfield’s easy grace of address. Was he one of the few men, in these days, who are shy in the presence of women? And was the change in Stella attributable, perhaps, to the state of her health? The explanation might, in either case, be the

right one. He tried to set them at their ease.

‘Mr. Winterfield is so pleased with the pictures, that he means to come and see them again,’ he said to his wife. ‘And one of his favourites happens to be your favourite, too.’

She tried to look at Winterfield, but her eyes sank. She could turn towards him, and that was all. ‘Is it the sea-piece in the study?’ she said to him faintly.

‘Yes,’ he answered, with formal politeness; ‘it seems to me to be one of the painter’s finest works.’

Romayne looked at him in unconcealed wonder. To what flat commonplace Winterfield’s lively enthusiasm had sunk in Stella’s presence! She perceived that some un-

favourable impression had been produced on her husband, and interposed with a timely suggestion. Her motive was not only to divert Romaine's attention from Winterfield, but to give him a reason for leaving the room.

'The little water-colour drawing in my bedroom is by the same artist,' she said. 'Mr. Winterfield might like to see it. If you will ring the bell, Lewis, I will send my maid for it.'

Romaine had never allowed the servants to touch his works of art, since the day when a zealous housemaid had tried to wash one of his plaster casts. He made the reply which his wife had anticipated.

'No! no!' he said. 'I will fetch the drawing myself.' He turned gaily to Winterfield. 'Prepare yourself for another

work that you would like to kiss.' He smiled, and left the room.

The instant the door was closed, Stella approached Winterfield. Her beautiful face became distorted by a mingled expression of rage and contempt. She spoke to him in a fierce peremptory whisper.

'Have you any consideration for me left?'

His look at her, as she put that question, revealed the most complete contrast between his face and hers. Compassionate sorrow was in his eyes, tender forbearance and respect spoke in his tones, as he answered her.

'I have more than consideration for you, Stella——'

She angrily interrupted him. 'How dare you call me by my Christian name?'

He remonstrated, with a gentleness that might have touched the heart of any woman. 'Do you still refuse to believe that I never deceived you? Has time not softened your heart to me yet?'

She was more contemptuous towards him than ever. 'Spare me your protestations,' she said; 'I heard enough of them two years since. Will you do what I ask of you?'

'You know that I will.'

'Put an end to your acquaintance with my husband. Put an end to it,' she repeated vehemently, 'from this day, at once and for ever! Can I trust you to do it?'

'Do you think I would have entered this house if I had known he was your husband?' He made that reply with a sudden change in him—with a rising colour, and in firm

tones of indignation. In a moment more, his voice softened again, and his kind blue eyes rested on her sadly and devotedly. 'You may trust me to do more than you ask,' he resumed. 'You have made a mistake.'

'What mistake?'

'When Mr. Romaine introduced us, you met me like a stranger—and you left me no choice but to do as you did.'

'I wish you to be a stranger.'

Her sharpest replies made no change in his manner. He spoke as kindly and as patiently as ever.

'You forget that you and your mother were my guests at Beaupark, two years ago——'

Stella understood what he meant—and more. In an instant she remembered that Father Benwell had been at Beaupark

House. Had he heard of the visit? She clasped her hands in speechless terror.

Winterfield gently reassured her. ‘You must not be frightened,’ he said. ‘It is in the last degree unlikely that Mr. Romaine will ever find out that you were at my house. If he does—and if you deny it—I will do for you what I would do for no other human creature; I will deny it too. You are safe from discovery. Be happy—and forget me.’

For the first time she showed signs of relenting—she turned her head away, and sighed. Although her mind was full of the serious necessity of warning him against Father Benwell, she had not even command enough over her own voice to ask how he had become acquainted with the priest. His manly devotion, the perfect and pathetic

sincerity of his respect, pleaded with her, in spite of herself. For a moment she paused to recover her composure. In that moment Romaine returned to them with the drawing in his hand.

‘There!’ he said. ‘It’s nothing, this time, but some children gathering flowers on the outskirts of a wood. What do you think of it?’

‘What I thought of the larger work,’ Winterfield answered. ‘I could look at it by the hour together.’ He consulted his watch. ‘But time is a hard master, and tells me that my visit must come to an end. Thank you, most sincerely.’

He bowed to Stella. Romaine thought his guest might have taken the English freedom of shaking hands. ‘When will you come and look at the pictures again?’



he asked. 'Will you dine with us, and see how they bear the lamp light?'

'I am sorry to say I must beg you to excuse me. My plans are altered since we met yesterday. I am obliged to leave London.'

Romayne was unwilling to part with him on these terms. 'You will let me know when you are next in town?' he said.

'Certainly!'

With that short answer he hurried away.

Romayne waited a little in the hall before he went back to his wife. Stella's reception of Winterfield, though not positively ungracious, was, nevertheless, the reverse of encouraging. What extraordinary caprice had made her insensible to the social attractions of a man so unaffectedly agreeable? It was not wonderful that

Winterfield's cordiality should have been chilled by the cold welcome that he had received from the mistress of the house. At the same time, some allowance was to be made for the influence of Stella's domestic anxieties, and some sympathy was claimed by the state of her health. Although her husband shrank from distressing her by any immediate reference to her reception of his friend, he could not disguise from himself that she had disappointed him. When he went back to the room, Stella was lying on the sofa, with her face turned towards the wall. She was in tears, and she was afraid to let him see it. 'I won't disturb you,' he said, and withdrew to his study. The precious volume which Winterfield had so kindly placed at his disposal was on the table, waiting for him.

Father Benwell had lost little by not being present at the introduction of Winterfield to Stella. He had witnessed a plainer betrayal of emotion when they met unexpectedly in Lord Loring's picture gallery. But if he had seen Romaine reading in his study, and Stella crying secretly on the sofa, he might have written to Rome by that day's post, and might have announced that he had sown the first seeds of disunion between husband and wife.

## CHAPTER V.

## FATHER BENWELL'S CORRESPONDENCE.

*To the Secretary. S. J. Rome.*

## I.

IN my last few hasty lines I was only able to inform you of the unexpected arrival of Mrs. Romaine while Winterfield was visiting her husband. If you remember, I warned you not to attach any undue importance to my absence on that occasion. My present report will satisfy my reverend brethren that the interests committed to me are as safe as ever in my hands.

I have paid three visits, at certain intervals. The first to Winterfield (briefly men-

tioned in my last letter); the second to Romaine; the third to the invalid lady, Mrs. Eyrecourt. In every case I have been rewarded by important results.

We will revert to Winterfield first. I found him at his hotel, enveloped in clouds of tobacco smoke. Having led him, with some difficulty, into talking of his visit to Ten Acres Lodge, I asked how he liked Romaine's pictures.

'I envy him his pictures.' That was the only answer.

'And how do you like Mrs. Romaine?' I inquired next.

He laid down his pipe, and looked at me attentively. My face (I flatter myself) defied discovery. He inhaled another mouthful of tobacco, and began to play with his dog. 'If I must answer your

question,' he burst out suddenly, 'I didn't get a very gracious reception from Mrs. Romaine.' There he abruptly stopped. He is a thoroughly transparent man; you see straight into his mind, through his eyes. I perceived that he was only telling me a part (perhaps a very small part) of the truth.

'Can you account for such a reception as you describe?' I asked. He answered shortly, 'No.'

'Perhaps I can account for it,' I went on. 'Did Mr. Romaine tell his wife that I was the means of introducing you to him?'

He fixed another searching look on me. 'Mr. Romaine might have said so when he left me to receive his wife at the door.'

'In that case, Mr. Winterfield, the ex-

planation is as plain as the sun at noonday. Mrs. Romaine is a strong Protestant, and I am a Catholic priest.'

He accepted this method of accounting for his reception with an alacrity that would not have imposed on a child. You see I had relieved him from all further necessity of accounting for the conduct of Mrs. Romaine!

'A lady's religious prejudices,' I proceeded in the friendliest way, 'are never taken seriously by a sensible man. You have placed Mr. Romaine under obligations to your kindness—he is eager to improve his acquaintance with you. You will go again to Ten Acres Lodge?'

He gave me another short answer. 'I think not.'

I said I was sorry to hear it. 'How-

ever,' I added, 'you can always see him here, when you are in London.' He puffed out a big volume of smoke, and made no remark. I declined to be put down by silence and smoke. 'Or perhaps,' I persisted, 'you will honour me by meeting him at a simple little dinner at my lodgings?' Being a gentleman, he was of course obliged to answer this. He said, 'You are very kind; I would rather not. Shall we talk of something else, Father Benwell?'

We talked of something else. He was just as amiable as ever—but he was not in good spirits. 'I think I shall run over to Paris before the end of the month,' he said. 'To make a long stay?' I asked. 'Oh, no! Call in a week or ten days—and you will find me here again.'

When I got up to go, he returned of



his own accord to the forbidden subject. He said, 'I must beg you to do me two favours. The first is, not to let Mr. Romaine know that I am still in London. The second is, not to ask me for any explanations.'

The result of our interview may be stated in very few words. It has advanced me one step nearer to discovery. Winterfield's voice, look, and manner satisfied me of this—the true motive for his sudden change of feeling towards Romaine is jealousy of the man who has married Miss Eyrecourt. Those compromising circumstances which baffled the inquiries of my agent are associated, in plain English, with a love affair. Remember all that I have told you of Romaine's peculiar disposition—and imagine, if you can, what the con-

sequences of such a disclosure will be when we are in a position to enlighten the master of Vange Abbey!

As to the present relations between the husband and wife, I have only to tell you next what passed, when I visited Romaine a day or two later. I did well to keep Penrose at our disposal. We shall want him again.

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On arriving at Ten Acres Lodge, I found Romaine in his study. His manuscript lay before him—but he was not at work. He looked worn and haggard. To this day I don't know from what precise nervous malady he suffers; I could only guess that it had been troubling him again since he and I last met.

My first conventional civilities were dedicated, of course, to his wife. She is

still in attendance on her mother. Mrs. Eyrecourt is now considered to be out of danger. But the good lady (who is ready enough to recommend doctors to other people) persists in thinking that she is too robust a person to require medical help herself. The physician in attendance trusts entirely to her daughter to persuade her to persevere with the necessary course of medicine. Don't suppose that I trouble you by mentioning these trumpery circumstances without a reason. We shall have occasion to return to Mrs. Eyrecourt and her doctor.

Before I had been five minutes in his company, Romaine asked me if I had seen Winterfield since his visit to Ten Acres Lodge.

I said I had seen him, and waited, anticipating the next question. Romaine ful-

filled my expectations. He inquired if Winterfield had left London.

There are certain cases (as I am told by medical authorities) in which the dangerous system of bleeding a patient still has its advantages. There are other cases in which the dangerous system of telling the truth becomes equally judicious. I said to Romaine, 'If I answer you honestly, will you consider it as strictly confidential? Mr. Winterfield, I regret to say, has no intention of improving his acquaintance with you. He asked me to conceal from you that he is still in London.'

Romaine's face plainly betrayed that he was annoyed and irritated. 'Nothing that you say to me, Father Benwell, shall pass the walls of this room,' he replied. 'Did Winterfield give any reason for not continuing his acquaintance with me?'

I told the truth once more, with courteous expressions of regret. 'Mr. Winterfield spoke of an ungracious reception on the part of Mrs. Romaine.'

He started to his feet, and walked irritably up and down the room. 'It is beyond endurance!' he said to himself.

The truth had served its purpose by this time. I affected not to have heard him. 'Did you speak to me?' I asked.

He used a milder form of expression. 'It is most unfortunate,' he said. 'I must immediately send back the valuable book which Mr. Winterfield has lent to me. And that is not the worst of it. There are other volumes in his library which I have the greatest interest in consulting—and it is impossible for me to borrow them now. At this time, too, when I have lost Penrose,

I had hoped to find in Winterfield another friend who sympathised with my pursuits. There is something so cheering and attractive in his manner—and he has just the boldness and novelty of view in his opinions that appeal to a man like me. It was a pleasant future to look forward to; and it must be sacrificed—and to what? To a woman's caprice.'

From our point of view this was a frame of mind to be encouraged. I tried the experiment of modestly taking the blame on myself. I suggested that I might be (quite innocently) answerable for Romaine's disappointment.

He looked at me, thoroughly puzzled. I repeated what I had said to Winterfield. 'Did you mention to Mrs. Romaine that I was the means of introducing you——?'

He was too impatient to let me finish

the sentence. 'I did mention it to Mrs. Romaine,' he said. 'And what of it?'

'Pardon me for reminding you that Mrs. Romaine has Protestant prejudices,' I rejoined. 'Mr. Winterfield would, I fear, not be very welcome to her as the friend of a Catholic priest.'

He was almost angry with me for suggesting the very explanation which had proved so acceptable to Winterfield.

'Nonsense!' he cried. 'My wife is far too well-bred a woman to let her prejudices express themselves in *that* way. Winterfield's personal appearance must have inspired her with some unreasonable antipathy, or——'

He stopped, and turned away thoughtfully to the window. Some vague suspicion had probably entered his mind, which he

had only become aware of at that moment, and which he was not quite able to realise as yet. I did my best to encourage the new train of thought.

‘What other reason *can* there be?’ I asked.

He turned on me sharply. ‘I don’t know. Do you?’

I ventured on a courteous remonstrance. ‘My dear sir! if you can’t find another reason, how can I? It must have been a sudden antipathy, as you say. Such things do happen between strangers. I suppose I am right in assuming that Mrs. Romaine and Mr. Winterfield are strangers?’

His eyes flashed with a sudden sinister brightness—the new idea had caught light in his mind. ‘They *met* as strangers,’ he said.



There he stopped again, and returned to the window. I felt that I might lose the place I had gained in his confidence if I pressed the subject any farther. Besides, I had my reasons for saying a word about Penrose next. As it happened, I had received a letter from him, relating to his present employment, and sending kindest regards to his dear friend and master in a postscript.

I gave the message. Romaine looked round, with an instant change in his face. The mere sound of Penrose's name seemed to act as a relief to the gloom and suspicion that had oppressed him the moment before. 'You don't know how I miss the dear gentle little fellow,' he said sadly.

'Why not write to him?' I suggested.  
'He would be so glad to hear from you again.'

‘I don’t know where to write.’

‘Did I not send you his address when I forwarded your letter to him?’

‘No.’

‘Then let me atone for my forgetfulness at once.’

I wrote down the address, and took my leave.

As I approached the door I noticed on a side table the Catholic volumes which Penrose left with Romaine. One of them was open, with a pencil lying beside it. I thought that a good sign—but I said nothing.

Romaine pressed my hand at parting. ‘You have been very kind and friendly, Father Benwell,’ he said. ‘I shall be glad to see you again.’

Don’t mention it in quarters where it

might do me harm. Do you know, I really pitied him. He ~~has~~ sacrificed everything to his marriage—and his marriage has disappointed him. He was even reduced to be friendly with Me.

Of course when the right time comes I shall give Penrose leave of absence. Do you foresee, as I do, the speedy return of 'the dear gentle little fellow' to his old employment; the resumed work of conversion advancing more rapidly than ever; and the jealousy of the Protestant wife aggravating the false position in which she is already placed by her equivocal reception of Winterfield? You may answer this by reminding me of the darker side of the prospect. An heir may be born; and the heir's mother, backed by general opinion, may insist—if there is any hesitation in the

matter—on asserting the boy's natural right to succeed his father. •

Patience, my reverend colleague! There is no threatening of any such calamity yet. And, even if it happens, don't forget that Romaine has inherited a second fortune. The Vange estate has an estimated value. If the act of restitution represented that value in ready money, do you think the Church would discourage a good convert by refusing his cheque? You know better than that—and so do I.

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The next day I called to inquire how Mrs. Eyrecourt was getting on. The report was favourable. Three days later I called again. The report was still more encouraging. I was also informed that Mrs. Romaine had returned to Ten Acres Lodge.

Much of my success in life has been achieved by never being in a hurry. I was not in a hurry now. Time sometimes brings opportunities—and opportunities are worth waiting for.

Let me make this clear by an example.

A man of headlong disposition, in my place, would have probably spoken of Miss Eyrecourt's marriage to Romaine at his first meeting with Winterfield, and would have excited their distrust, and put them respectively on their guard, without obtaining any useful result. I can, at any time, make the disclosure to Romaine which informs him that his wife had been Winterfield's guest in Devonshire, when she affected to meet her former host on the footing of a stranger. In the meanwhile, I give Penrose ample oppor-

tunity for innocently widening the breach between husband and wife.

You see, I hope, that if I maintain a passive position, it is not from indolence or discouragement. Now we may get on.

After an interval of a few days more I decided on making further inquiries at Mrs. Eyrecourt's house. This time, when I left my card, I sent a message, asking if the lady could receive me. Shall I own my weakness? She possesses all the information that I want, and she has twice baffled my inquiries. Under these humiliating circumstances, it is part of the priestly pugnacity of my disposition to inquire again.

I was invited to go upstairs.

The front and back drawing-rooms of the house were thrown into one. Mrs.

Eyrecourt was being gently moved backwards and forwards in a chair on wheels, propelled by her maid; two gentlemen being present, visitors like myself. In spite of rouge and loosely folded lace and flowing draperies, she presented a deplorable spectacle. The bodily part of her looked like a dead woman, painted and revived—while the moral part, in the strongest contrast, was just as lively as ever.

‘So glad to see you again, Father Benwell, and so much obliged by your kind inquiries. I am quite well, though the doctor won’t admit it. Isn’t it funny to see me being wheeled about, like a child in a perambulator? Returning to first principles, I call it. You see it’s a law of my nature that I must go about.

The doctor won't let me go about outside the house, so I go about inside the house. Matilda is the nurse, and I am the baby who will learn to walk some of these days. Are you tired, Matilda? No? Then give me another turn, there's a good creature. Movement, perpetual movement, is a law of nature. Oh, dear no, doctor; I didn't make that discovery for myself. Some eminent scientific person mentioned it in a lecture. The ugliest man I ever saw. Now back again, Matilda. Let me introduce you to my friends, Father Benwell. Introducing is out of fashion, I know. But I am one of the few women who can resist the tyranny of fashion. I like introducing people. Sir John Drone — Father Benwell. Father Benwell—Doctor Wybrow. Ah, yes, you



know the doctor by reputation? Shall I give you his character? Personally charming; professionally detestable. Pardon my impudence, doctor; it is one of the consequences of the overflowing state of my health. Another turn, Matilda—and a little faster this time. Oh, how I wish I was travelling by railway.'

There, her breath failed her. She reclined in her chair, and fanned herself silently—for awhile.

I was now able to turn my attention to the two visitors. Sir John Drone, it was easy to see, would be no obstacle to confidential conversation with Mrs. Eyre-court. An excellent country gentleman, with the bald head, the ruddy complexion, and the inexhaustible capacity for silence, so familiar to us in English society—there

you have the true description of Sir John. But the famous physician was quite another sort of man. I had only to look at him, and to feel myself condemned to small talk while *he* was in the room.

You have always heard of it in my correspondence, whenever I have been in the wrong. I was in the wrong again now—I had forgotten the law of chances. Capricious Fortune, after a long interval, was about to declare herself again in my favour, by means of the very woman who had twice already got the better of me. What a recompense for my kind inquiries after Mrs. Eyrecourt! She recovered breath enough to begin talking again.

‘Dear me, how dull you are!’ she said to us. ‘Why don’t you amuse a poor prisoner confined to the house? Rest a

little, Matilda, or you will be falling ill next. Doctor! is this your last professional visit?’

‘Promise to take care of yourself, Mrs. Eyrecourt, and I will confess that the professional visits are over. I come here to-day only as a friend.’

‘You best of men! Do me another favour. Enliven our dulness. Tell us some interesting story about a patient. These great doctors, Sir John, pass their lives in a perfect atmosphere of romance. Dr. Wybrow’s consulting-room is like your confessional, Father Benwell. The most fascinating sins and sorrows are poured into his ears. What is the last romance in real life, doctor, that has asked you to treat it medically? We don’t want names and places—we are good children; we only want a story.’

Dr. Wybrow looked at me with a smile.

‘It is impossible to persuade ladies,’ he said, ‘that we, too, are father-confessors in our way. The first duty of a doctor, Mrs. Eyrecourt——’

‘Is to cure people, of course,’ she interposed in her smartest manner.

The doctor answered seriously. ‘No, indeed. That is only the second duty. Our first duty is invariably to respect the confidence of our patients. However,’ he resumed in his easier tone, ‘I happen to have seen a patient to-day, under circumstances which the rules of professional honour do not forbid me to mention. I don’t know, Mrs. Eyrecourt, whether you will quite like to be introduced to the scene of the story. The scene is in a mad-house.’

Mrs. Eyrecourt burst out with a co-quettish little scream, and shook her fan at the doctor. 'No horrors!' she cried. 'The bare idea of a madhouse distracts me with terror. Oh, fie, fie! I won't listen to you—I won't look at you—I positively refuse to be frightened out of my wits. Matilda! wheel me away to the farthest end of the room. My vivid imagination, Father Benwell, is my rock ahead in life. I declare I can *smell* the odious madhouse. Go straight to the window, Matilda; I want to bury my nose among the flowers.'

Sir John, upon this, spoke for the first time. His language consisted entirely of beginnings of sentences, mutely completed by a smile. 'Upon my word, you know. Eh, Doctor Wybrow? A man of your experience. Horrors in madhouses. A lady

in delicate health. No, really. Upon my honour, now, I cannot. Something funny, oh yes. But such a subject, oh no.'

He rose to leave us. Doctor Wybrow gently stopped him. 'I had a motive, Sir John,' he said, 'but I won't trouble you with needless explanations. There is a person, unknown to me, whom I want to discover. You are a great deal in society when you are in London. May I ask if you have ever met with a gentleman named Winterfield?'

I have always considered the power of self-control as one of the strongest points in my character. For the future I shall be more humble. When I heard that name, my surprise so completely mastered me that I sat self-betrayed to Dr. Wybrow, as the man who could answer his question.

In the meanwhile, Sir John took his time to consider, and discovered that he had never heard of a person named Winterfield. Having acknowledged his ignorance, in his own eloquent language, he drifted away to the window-box in the next room, and gravely contemplated Mrs. Eyrecourt, with her nose buried in flowers.

The doctor turned to me. ‘Am I wrong, Father Benwell, in supposing that I had better have addressed myself to *you*?’

I admitted that I knew a gentleman named Winterfield.

Dr. Wybrow got up directly. ‘Have you a few minutes to spare?’ he asked. It is needless to say that I was at the doctor’s disposal. ‘My house is close by, and my carriage is at the door,’ he resumed.

‘When you feel inclined to say good-bye to our friend Mrs. Eyrecourt, I have something to say to you which I think you ought to know.’

We took our departure at once. Mrs. Eyrecourt (leaving some of the colour of her nose among the flowers) patted me encouragingly with her fan, and told the doctor that he was forgiven, on the understanding that he would ‘never do it again.’ In five minutes more we were in Dr. Wybrow’s study.

My watch tells me that I cannot hope to finish this letter by post time. Accept what I have written thus far—and be assured that the conclusion of my report shall follow a day later.



## II.

The Doctor began cautiously. 'Winterfield is not a very common name,' he said. 'But it may not be amiss, Father Benwell, to discover, if we can, whether *your* Winterfield is the man of whom I am in search. Do you only know him by name? or are you a friend of his?'

I answered, of course, that I was a friend.

Doctor Wybrow went on. 'Will you pardon me if I venture on an indiscreet question? When you are acquainted with the circumstances, I am sure you will understand and excuse me. Are you aware of any—what shall I call it?—any romantic incident in Mr. Winterfield's past life?'

This time—feeling myself, in all probability, on the brink of discovery—I was careful to preserve my composure. I said, quietly, ‘Some such incident as you describe has occurred in Mr. Winterfield’s past life.’ There I stopped discreetly, and looked as if I knew all about it.

The Doctor showed no curiosity to hear more. ‘My object,’ he went on, ‘was merely to be reasonably sure that I was speaking to the right person, in speaking to you. I may now tell you that I have no personal interest in trying to discover Mr. Winterfield; I only act as the representative of an old friend of mine. He is the proprietor of a private asylum at Sandsworth—a man whose integrity is beyond dispute, or he would not be my friend. You understand my motive in saying this?’

Proprietors of private asylums are, in these days, the objects of very general distrust in England. I understood the doctor's motive perfectly.

He proceeded. 'Yesterday evening, my friend called upon me, and said that he had a remarkable case in his house, which he believed would interest me. The person to whom he alluded was a French boy, whose mental powers had been imperfectly developed from his childhood. The mischief had been aggravated, when he was about thirteen years old, by a serious fright. When he was placed in my asylum, he was not idiotic, and not dangerously mad—it was a case (not to use technical language) of deficient intelligence, tending sometimes towards acts of unreasoning mischief and petty theft, but never ap-

proaching to acts of downright violence. My friend was especially interested in the lad—won his confidence and affection by acts of kindness—and so improved his bodily health as to justify some hope of also improving the state of his mind, when a misfortune occurred which has altered the whole prospect. The poor creature has fallen ill of a fever, and the fever has developed to typhus. So far, there has been little to interest you—I am coming to a remarkable event at last. At the stage of the fever when delirium usually occurs in patients of sound mind, this crazy French boy has become perfectly sane and reasonable!’

I looked at him, when he made this amazing assertion, with a momentary doubt of his being in earnest. Doctor Wybrow understood me.

‘Just what I thought, too, when I first heard it!’ he said. ‘My friend was neither offended nor surprised. After inviting me to go to his house, and judge for myself, he referred me to a similar case, publicly cited in the “Cornhill Magazine,” for the month of April, 1879, in an article entitled “Bodily Illness as a Mental Stimulant.” The article is published anonymously; but the character of the periodical in which it appears is a sufficient guarantee of the trustworthiness of the statement. I was so far influenced by the testimony thus cited, that I drove to Sandsworth and examined the case myself.’

‘Did the examination satisfy you?’

‘Thoroughly. When I saw him last night, the poor boy was as sane as I am. There is, however, a complication in this

instance, which is not mentioned in the case related in print. The boy appears to have entirely forgotten every event in his past life, reckoning from the time when the bodily illness brought with it the strange mental recovery which I have mentioned to you.'

This was a disappointment. I had begun to hope for some coming result, obtained by the lad's confession.

'Is it quite correct to call him sane, when his memory is gone?' I ventured to ask.

'In this case there is no necessity to enter into the question,' the Doctor answered. 'The boy's lapse of memory refers, as I told you, to his past life—that is to say, his life when his intellect was deranged. During the extraordinary in-

terval of sanity that has now declared itself, he is putting his mental powers to their first free use ; and none of them fail him, so far as I can see. His new memory (if I may call it so) preserves the knowledge of what has happened since his illness. You may imagine how this problem in brain disease interests me ; and you will not wonder that I am going back to Sandsworth to-morrow afternoon, when I have done with my professional visits. But you may be reasonably surprised at my troubling *you* with details which are mainly interesting to a medical man.

Was he about to ask me to go with him to the asylum ? I replied very briefly, merely saying that the details were interesting to every student of human nature. If he could have felt my pulse at that

moment, I am afraid he might have thought I was in a fair way of catching the fever too.

‘Prepare yourself,’ he resumed, ‘for another surprising circumstance. Mr. Winterfield is, by some incomprehensible accident, associated with one of the mischievous tricks played by the French boy, before he was placed under my friend’s care. There, at any rate, is the only explanation by which we can account for the discovery of an envelope (with enclosures) found sewn up in the lining of the lad’s waistcoat, and directed to Mr. Winterfield—without any place of address.’

I leave you to imagine the effect which those words produced on me.

‘Now,’ said the doctor, ‘you will understand why I put such strange questions



to you. My friend and I are both hard-working men. We go very little into society, as the phrase is; and neither he nor I had ever heard the name of Winterfield. As a certain proportion of my patients happen to be people with a large experience of society, I undertook to make inquiries, so that the packet might be delivered, if possible, to the right person. You heard how Mrs. Eyrecourt (surely a likely lady to assist me?) received my unlucky reference to the madhouse; and you saw how I puzzled Sir John. I consider myself most fortunate, Father Benwell, in having had the honour of meeting you. Will you accompany me to the asylum to-morrow? And can you add to the favour by bringing Mr. Winterfield with you?’

This last request it was out of my

power—really out of my power—to grant. Winterfield had left London that morning on his visit to Paris. His address there was, thus far, not known to me.

‘Well, you must represent your friend,’ the Doctor said. ‘Time is every way of importance in this case. Will you kindly call here at five to-morrow afternoon?’

I was punctual to my appointment. We drove together to the asylum.

There is no need for me to trouble you with a narrative of what I saw—favoured by Doctor Wybrow’s introduction—at the French boy’s bedside. It was simply a repetition of what I had already heard. There he lay, at the height of the fever, asking, in the intervals of relief, intelligent questions relating to the medicines administered to him, and perfectly under-

standing the answers. He was only irritable when we asked him to take his memory back to the time before his illness; and then he answered in French, 'I haven't got a memory.'

But I have something else to tell you, which is deserving of your best attention. The envelope and its enclosures (addressed to 'Bernard Winterfield, Esqre.') are in my possession. The Christian name sufficiently identifies the inscription with the Winterfield whom I know.

The circumstances under which the discovery was made were related to me by the proprietor of the asylum.

When the boy was brought to the house, two French ladies (his mother and sister) accompanied him, and mentioned what had been their own domestic experi-

ence of the case. They described the wandering propensities which took the lad away from home, and the odd concealment of his waistcoat, on the last occasion when he had returned from one of his vagrant outbreaks.

On his first night at the asylum he became excited by finding himself in a strange place. It was necessary to give him a composing draught. On going to bed, he was purposely not prevented from hiding his waistcoat under the pillow, as usual.

When the sedative had produced its effect, the attendant easily possessed himself of the hidden garment. It was the plain duty of the master of the house to make sure that nothing likely to be turned to evil uses was concealed by a patient.

The seal which had secured the envelope was found, on examination, to have been broken.

‘I would not have broken the seal myself,’ our host added. ‘But, as things were, I thought it my duty to look at the enclosures. They refer to private affairs of Mr. Winterfield, in which he is deeply interested, and they ought to have been long since placed in his possession. I need hardly say that I consider myself bound to preserve the strictest silence as to what I have read. An envelope, containing some blank sheets of paper, was put back in the boy’s waistcoat, so that he might feel it in its place under the lining, when he woke. The original envelope and enclosures (with a statement of circumstances signed by my assistant and myself) have

been secured under another cover, sealed with my own seal. I have done my best to discover Mr. Bernard Winterfield. He appears not to live in London. At least I failed to find his name in the Directory. I wrote next, mentioning what had happened, to the English gentleman to whom I send reports of the lad's health. He couldn't help me. A second letter to the French ladies only produced the same result. I own I should be glad to get rid of my responsibility on honourable terms.'

All this was said in the boy's presence. He lay listening to it as if it had been a story told of someone else. I could not resist the useless desire to question him. Not speaking French myself (although I can read the language), I asked Doctor Wybrow and his friend to interpret for me.'

My questions led to nothing. The French boy knew no more about the stolen envelope than I did.

There was no discoverable motive, mind, for suspecting him of imposing on us. When I said, 'Perhaps you stole it?' he answered quite composedly, 'Very likely; they tell me I have been mad; I don't remember it myself; but mad people do strange things.' I tried him again. 'Or, perhaps, you took it away out of mischief?' 'Yes.' 'And you broke the seal, and looked at the papers?' 'I dare say.' 'And then you kept them hidden, thinking they might be of some use to you? Or perhaps feeling ashamed of what you had done, and meaning to restore them if you got the opportunity?' 'You know best, sir.' The same result followed when

we tried to find out where he had been, and what people had taken care of him, during his last vagrant escape from home. It was a new revelation to him that he had been anywhere. With evident interest, he applied to *us* to tell him where he had wandered to, and what people he had seen !

So our last attempts at enlightenment ended. We came to the final question of how to place the papers, with the least possible loss of time, in Mr. Winterfield's hands.

His absence in Paris having been mentioned, I stated plainly my own position towards him at the present time.

‘ Mr. Winterfield has made an appointment with me to call at his hotel, on his return to London,’ I said. ‘ I shall probably



be the first friend who sees him. If you will trust me with your sealed packet, in consideration of these circumstances, I will give you a formal receipt for it in Doctor Wybrow's presence—and I will add any written pledge that you may require on my part, acting as Mr. Winterfield's representative and friend. Perhaps you would like a reference, as well?'

He made a courteous reply. 'A friend of Doctor Wybrow's,' he said, 'requires no other reference.'

'Excuse me,' I persisted. 'I had the honour of meeting Doctor Wybrow, for the first time, yesterday. Permit me to refer you to Lord Loring, who has long known me as his spiritual director and friend.'

This account of myself settled the matter. I drew out the necessary securities—and I

have all the papers lying before me on my desk at this moment.

You remember how seals were broken, and impressed again, at the Roman post-office, in the revolutionary days when we were both young men? Thanks to the knowledge then obtained, the extraordinary events which once associated Mr. Winterfield and Miss Eyrecourt are at last plainly revealed to me. Copies of the papers are in my possession, and the originals are sealed again, with the crest of the proprietor of the asylum, as if nothing had happened. I make no attempt to excuse myself. You know our motto :—THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS.

I don't propose to make any premature use of the information which I have obtained. The first and foremost necessity,

as I have already reminded you, is to give Penrose the undisturbed opportunity of completing the conversion of Romaine. During this interval, my copies of the papers are at the disposal of my reverend brethren at head-quarters.

THE STOLEN PAPERS.—(COPIES.)

*Number One.—From Emma Winterfield to  
Bernard Winterfield.*

4, Maidwell Buildings, Belhaven.

How shall I address you? Dear Bernard, or Sir? It doesn't matter. I am going to do one of the few good actions of my life; and familiarities or formalities matter nothing to a woman who lies on her deathbed.

Yes—I have met with another accident.

Shortly after the date of our separation, you heard, I think, of the fall in the circus that fractured my skull? On that occasion a surgical operation, and a bit of silver plate in place of the bone, put me right again. This time it has been the kick of a horse, in the stables. Some internal injury is the consequence. I may die to-morrow, or live till next week. Anyway, the doctor has confessed it,—my time has come.

Mind one thing. The drink—that vile habit which lost me your love and banished me from your house—the drink is not to blame for this last misfortune. Only the day before it happened I had taken the pledge, under persuasion of the good rector here, the Reverend Mr. Fennick. It is he who has brought me to make this

confession, and who takes it down in writing at my bedside. Do you remember how I once hated the very name of a parson—and when you proposed, in joke, to marry me before the registrar, how I took it in downright earnest, and kept you to your word? We poor horseriders and acrobats only knew clergymen as the worst enemies we had—always using their influence to keep the people out of our show, and the bread out of our mouths. If I had met with Mr. Fennick in my younger days, what a different woman I might have been!

Well, regrets of that kind are useless now. I am truly sorry, Bernard, for the evil that I have done to you; and I ask your pardon with a contrite heart.

You will at least allow it in my favour that your drunken wife knew she was

unworthy of you. I refused to accept the allowance that you offered to me. I respected your name. For seven years from the time of our separation I returned to my profession under an assumed name, and never troubled you. The one thing I could not do was to forget you. If you were infatuated by my unlucky beauty, I loved devotedly on my side. The well-born gentleman who had sacrificed everything for my sake, was something more than mortal in my estimation ; he was—no ! I won't shock the good man who writes this by saying what he was. Besides, what do you care for my thoughts of you now ?

If you had only been content to remain as I left you—or if I had not found out that you were in love with Miss Eyrecourt, and were likely to marry her, in the belief

that death had released you from me—I should have lived and died, doing you no other injury than the first great injury of consenting to be your wife.

But I made the discovery—it doesn't matter how. Our circus was in Devonshire at the time. My jealous rage maddened me, and I had a wicked admirer in a man who was old enough to be my father. I let him suppose that the way to my favour lay through helping my revenge on the woman who was about to take my place. He found the money to have you watched at home and abroad; he put the false announcement of my death in the daily newspapers, to complete your delusion; he baffled the inquiries made through your lawyers to obtain positive proof of my death. And last, and (in those wicked days) best service of all

he took me to Brussels and posted me at the door of the English Church, so that your lawful wife (with her marriage certificate in her hand) was the first person who met you and the mock Mrs. Winterfield on your way from the altar to the wedding breakfast.

I own it, to my shame. I triumphed in the mischief I had done.

But I had deserved to suffer; and I did suffer, when I heard that Miss Eyrecourt's mother and her two friends took her away from you—with her own entire approval—at the church door, and restored her to society, without a stain on her reputation. How the Brussels marriage was kept a secret, I could not find out. And when I threatened them with exposure, I got a lawyer's letter, and was advised in



my own interests to hold my tongue. The rector has since told me that your marriage to Miss Eyrecourt could be lawfully declared null and void, and that the circumstances would excuse *you*, before any judge in England. I can now well understand that people, with rank and money to help them, can avoid exposure to which the poor, in their places, must submit.

One more duty (the last) still remains to be done.

I declare solemnly, on my deathbed, that you acted in perfect good faith when you married Miss Eyrecourt. You have not only been a man cruelly injured by me, but vilely insulted and misjudged by the two Eyrecourts, and by the lord and lady who encouraged them to set you down as a villain guilty of heartless and shameless deceit.

It is my conviction that these people might have done more than misinterpret your honourable submission to the circumstances in which you were placed. They might have prosecuted you for bigamy—if they could have got me to appear against you. I am comforted when I remember that I did make some small amends. I kept out of their way and yours, from that day to this.

I am told that I owe it to you to leave proof of my death behind me.

When the doctor writes my certificate, he will mention the mark by which I may be identified, if this reaches you (as I hope and believe it will) between the time of my death and my burial. The rector, who will close and seal these lines, as soon as the breath is out of my body, will add what

he can to identify me; and the landlady of this house is ready to answer any questions that may be put to her. This time you may be really assured that you are free. When I am buried, and they show you my nameless grave in the churchyard, I know your kind heart—I die, Bernard, in the firm belief that you will forgive me.

There was one thing more that I had to ask of you, relating to a poor lost creature who is in the room with us at this moment. But, oh, I am so weary! Mr. Fennick will tell you what it is. Say to yourself sometimes—perhaps when you have married some lady who is worthy of you—There was good as well as bad in poor Emma. Farewell.

*Number Two.—From The Reverend Charles  
Fennick to Bernard Winterfield.*

The Rectory, Belhaven.

Sir,—It is my sad duty to inform you that Mrs. Emma Winterfield died this morning, a little before five o'clock. I will add no comment of mine to the touching language in which she has addressed you. God has, I most sincerely believe, accepted the poor sinner's repentance. Her contrite spirit is at peace, among the forgiven ones in the world beyond the grave.

In consideration of her wish that you should see her in death, the coffin will be kept open until the last moment. The medical man in attendance has kindly given me a copy of his certificate, which I

enclose. You will see that the remains are identified by the description of a small silver plate on the right parietal bone of the skull.

I need hardly add that all the information I can give you is willingly at your service.

She mentions, poor soul, something which she had to ask of you. I prefer the request which, in her exhausted state, she was unable to address to you in her own words.

While the performances of the circus were taking place in the next county to ours, a wandering lad, evidently of deficient intelligence, was discovered, trying to creep under the tent to see what was going on. He could give no intelligible account of himself. The late Mrs. Winterfield (who

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was born and brought up, as I understand, in France) discovered that the boy was French, and felt interested in the unfortunate creature, from former happy association with kind friends of his nation. She took care of him, from that time to the day of her death—and he appeared to be gratefully attached to her.

I say ‘appeared,’ because an inveterate reserve marks one of the peculiarities of the mental affliction from which he suffers. Even his benefactress never could persuade him to take her into his confidence. In other respects, her influence (so far as I can learn) had been successfully exerted in restraining certain mischievous propensities in him, which occasionally showed themselves. The effect of her death has been to intensify that reserve to which I have

already alluded. He is sullen and irritable—and the good landlady at the lodgings does not disguise that she shrinks from taking care of him, even for a few days. Until I hear from you, he will remain under the charge of my housekeeper at the rectory.

You have, no doubt, anticipated the request which the poor sufferer wished to address to you but a few hours before her death. She hoped that you might be willing to place this friendless and helpless creature under competent protection. Failing your assistance, I shall have no alternative, however I may regret it, but to send him to the workhouse of this town, on his way, probably, to the public asylum.

Believe me, sir, your faithful servant,

CHARLES FENNICK.

P.S.—I fear my letter and its enclosures may be delayed in reaching you.

Yesterday evening, I had returned to my house, before it occurred to me that Mrs. Winterfield had not mentioned your address. My only excuse for this forgetfulness is, that I was very much distressed while I was writing by her bedside. I at once went back to the lodgings, but she had fallen asleep, and I dare not disturb her. This morning, when I returned to the house, she was dead. There is an allusion to Devonshire in her letter, which suggests that your residence may be in that county; and I think she once spoke of you as a person of rank and fortune. Having failed to find your name in a London directory, I am now about to search our free library



here for a county history of Devon, on the chance that it may assist me. Let me add, for your own satisfaction, that no eyes but mine will see these papers. For security's sake, I shall seal them at once, and write your name on the envelope.

*Added by Father Benwell.*

How the boy contrived to possess himself of the sealed packet, we shall probably never discover. Anyhow, we know that he must have escaped from the rectory, with the papers in his possession, and that he did certainly get back to his mother and sister in London.

With such complete information as I now have at my disposal, the prospect is

as clear again as we can desire. The separation of Romaine from his wife, and the alteration of his will in favour of the Church, seem to be now merely questions of time.

THE STORY.

*BOOK THE FOURTH.*



## CHAPTER I.

### THE BREACH IS WIDENED.

A FORTNIGHT after Father Benwell's discovery, Stella followed her husband one morning into his study. 'Have you heard from Mr. Penrose?' she inquired.

'Yes. He will be here to-morrow.'

'To make a long visit?'

'I hope so. The longer the better.'

She looked at him with a mingled expression of surprise and reproach. 'Why do you say that?' she asked. 'Why do you want him so much—when you have got Me?'

Thus far, he had been sitting at his

desk, resting his head on his hand, with his downcast eyes fixed on an open book. When she put her last question to him, he suddenly looked up. Through the large window at his side, the morning light fell on his face. The haggard look of suffering, which Stella remembered on the day when they met on the deck of the steamboat, was again visible—not softened and chastened now by the touching resignation of the bygone time, but intensified by the dogged and despairing endurance of a man weary of himself and his life. Her heart ached for him. She said softly, ‘I don’t mean to reproach you.’

‘Are you jealous of Penrose?’ he asked, with a bitter smile.

She desperately told him the truth. ‘I am afraid of Penrose,’ she answered.

He eyed her with a strange expression of suspicious surprise. 'Why are you afraid of Penrose?'

It was no time to run the risk of irritating him. The torment of the Voice had returned in the past night. The old gnawing remorse of the fatal day of the duel had betrayed itself in the wild words that had escaped him, when he sank into a broken slumber as the morning dawned. Feeling the truest pity for him, she was still resolute to assert herself against the coming interference of Penrose. She tried her ground by a dangerous means—the means of an indirect reply.

'I think you might have told me,' she said, 'that Mr. Penrose was a Catholic priest.'

He looked down again at his book.

‘How did you know Penrose was a Catholic priest?’

‘I had only to look at the direction on your letters to him.’

‘Well, and what is there to frighten you in his being a priest? You told me at the Loring’s ball that you took an interest in Penrose because I liked him.’

‘I didn’t know then, Lewis, that he had concealed his profession from us. I can’t help distrusting a man who does that.’

He laughed—not very kindly. ‘You might as well say you distrust a man who conceals that he is an author, by writing an anonymous book. What Penrose did, he did under orders from his superior—and, moreover, he frankly owned to me that he was a priest. If you blame anybody, you had better blame me for respecting his confidence.’

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She drew back from him, hurt by the tone in which he spoke to her. 'I remember the time, Lewis,' she said, 'when you would have been more indulgent towards my errors—even if I am wrong.'

That simple appeal touched his better nature. 'I don't mean to be hard on you, Stella,' he answered. 'It is a little irritating to hear you say that you distrust the most devoted and most affectionate friend that man ever had. Why can't I love my wife, and love my friend, too? You don't know, when I am trying to get on with my book, how I miss the help and sympathy of Penrose. The very sound of his voice used to encourage me. Come, Stella, give me a kiss—and let us, as the children say, make it up!'

He rose from his writing-table. She

met him more than half way, and pressed all her love—and perhaps a little of her fear—on his lips. He returned the kiss as warmly as it was given ; and then, unhappily for both of them, he went back to the subject.

‘My own love,’ he said, ‘try to like my friend for my sake ; and be tolerant of other forms of Christianity besides the form which happens to be yours.’

Her smiling lips closed ; she turned from him. With the sensitive selfishness of a woman’s love, she looked on Penrose as a robber who had stolen the sympathies which should have been wholly hers. As she moved away, her quick observation noticed the open book on the desk, with notes and lines in pencil on the margin of the page. What had Romaine been read-

ing which interested him in *that* way? If he had remained silent, she would have addressed the inquiry to him openly. But he was hurt, on his side, by the sudden manner of her withdrawal from him. He spoke—and his tone was colder than ever.

‘I won’t attempt to combat your prejudices,’ he said. ‘But one thing I must seriously ask of you. When my friend Penrose comes here to-morrow, don’t treat him as you treated Mr. Winterfield.’

There was a momentary paleness in her face which looked like fear, but it passed away again. She confronted him firmly with steady eyes.

‘Why do you refer again to that?’ she asked. ‘Is——’ (she hesitated, and recovered herself)—‘is Mr. Winterfield another devoted friend of yours?’

He walked to the door, as if he could hardly trust his temper if he answered her—stopped—and, thinking better of it, turned towards her again.

‘We won’t quarrel, Stella,’ he rejoined ; ‘I will only say I am sorry you don’t appreciate my forbearance. Your reception of Mr. Winterfield has lost me the friendship of a man whom I sincerely liked, and who might have assisted my literary labours. You were ill at the time, and anxious about Mrs. Eyrecourt. I respected your devotion to your mother. I remembered your telling me, when you first went away to nurse her, that your conscience accused you of having sometimes thoughtlessly neglected your mother in her days of health and good spirits, and I admired the motive of atonement which took you to her bedside.

For those reasons I shrank from saying a word that might wound you. But, because I was silent, it is not the less true that you surprised and disappointed me. Don't do it again! Whatever you may privately think of Catholic priests, I once more seriously request you not to let Penrose see it.'

He left the room.

She stood, looking after him as he closed the door, like a woman thunderstruck. Never yet had he looked at her as he looked when he spoke his last warning words. With a heavy sigh she roused herself. The vague dread with which his tone rather than his words had inspired her, strangely associated itself with the momentary curiosity which she had felt on noticing the annotated book that lay on his desk.

She snatched up the volume, and looked at the open page. It contained the closing paragraphs of an eloquent attack on Protestantism, from the Roman Catholic point of view. With trembling hands she turned back to the title page. It presented this written inscription :—‘To Lewis Romaine from his attached friend and servant, Arthur Penrose.’

‘God help me!’ she said to herself, ‘the priest has got between us already!’

## CHAPTER II.

## A CHRISTIAN JESUIT.

ON the next day Penrose arrived on his visit to Romaine.

The affectionate meeting between the two men tested Stella's self-control as it had never been tried yet. She submitted to the ordeal with the courage of a woman whose happiness depended on her outward graciousness of manner towards her husband's friend. Her reception of Penrose, viewed as an act of refined courtesy, was beyond reproach. When she found her opportunity of leaving the room, Romaine gratefully opened the door for her. 'Thank

you ! ' he whispered, with a look which was intended to reward her.

She only bowed to him, and took refuge in her own room.

Even in trifles, a woman's nature is degraded by the falsities of language and manner which the artificial condition of modern society exacts from her. When she yields herself to more serious deceptions, intended to protect her dearest domestic interests, the mischief is increased in proportion. Deceit, which is the natural weapon of defence used by the weak creature against the strong, then ceases to be confined within the limits assigned by the sense of self-respect and by the restraints of education. A woman in this position will descend, self-blinded, to acts of meanness which would be revolting to her if they



were related of another person. Stella had already begun the process of self-degradation by writing secretly to Winterfield. It was only to warn him of the danger of trusting Father Benwell—but it was a letter, claiming him as her accomplice in an act of deception. That morning she had received Penrose with the outward cordialities of welcome which are offered to an old and dear friend. And now in the safe solitude of her room, she had fallen to a lower depth still. She was deliberately considering the safest means of acquainting herself with the confidential conversation which Romaine and Penrose would certainly hold when she left them together. ‘He will try to set my husband against me ; and I have a right to know what means he uses, in my own defence.’ With that thought she reconciled

herself to an action which she would have despised if she had heard of it as the action of another woman.

It was a beautiful autumn day, brightened by clear sunshine, enlivened by crisp air. Stella put on her hat, and went out for a stroll in the grounds.

While she was within view from the windows of the servants' offices she walked away from the house. Turning the corner of a shrubbery, she entered a winding path, on the other side, which led back to the lawn under Romaine's study window. Garden chairs were placed here and there. She took one of them, and seated herself—after a last moment of honourable hesitation—where she could hear the men's voices through the open window above her.

Penrose was speaking at the time.

‘Yes. Father Benwell has granted me a holiday,’ he said; ‘but I don’t come here to be an idle man. You must allow me to employ my term of leave in the pleasantest of all ways. I mean to be your secretary again.’

Romayne sighed. ‘Ah, if you knew how I have missed you!’

(Stella waited, in breathless expectation for what Penrose would say to this. Would he speak of *her*? No. There was a natural tact and delicacy in him which waited for the husband to introduce the subject.)

Penrose only said, ‘How is the great work getting on?’

The answer was sternly spoken in one word—‘Badly!’

‘I am surprised to hear that, Romayne.’

‘Why? Were you as innocently hopeful as I was? Did you expect my experience of married life to help me in writing my book?’

Penrose replied after a pause, speaking a little sadly. ‘I expected your married life to encourage you in all your highest aspirations,’ he said.

(Stella turned pale with suppressed anger. He had spoken with perfect sincerity. The unhappy woman believed that he lied, for the express purpose of rousing irritation against her, in her husband’s irritable mind. She listened anxiously for Romaine’s answer.)

He made no answer. Penrose changed the subject. ‘You are not looking very well,’ he gently resumed. ‘I am afraid your health has interfered with your work. Have you had any return——?’

It was still one of the characteristics of Romaine's nervous irritability that he disliked to hear the terrible delusion of the Voice referred to in words. 'Yes,' he interposed bitterly, 'I have heard it again and again. My right hand is as red as ever, Penrose, with the blood of a fellow-creature. Another destruction of my illusions when I married!'

'Romaine! I don't like to hear you speak of your marriage in that way.'

'Oh, very well. Let us go back to my book. Perhaps I shall get on better with it now you are here to help me. My ambition to make a name in the world has never taken so strong a hold on me (I don't know why, unless other disappointments have had something to do with it) as at this time, when I find I can't give my mind to

my work. We will make a last effort together, my friend! If it fails, we will put my manuscripts into the fire, and I will try some other career. Politics are open to me. Through politics, I might make my mark in diplomacy. There is something in directing the destinies of nations wonderfully attractive to me in my present state of feeling. I hate the idea of being indebted for my position in the world, like the veriest fool living, to the accidents of birth and fortune. Are *you* content with the obscure life that you lead? Did you not envy that priest (he is no older than I am) who was sent the other day as the Pope's ambassador to Portugal?'

Penrose spoke out at last without hesitation. 'You are in a thoroughly unwholesome state of mind,' he said.

Romayne laughed recklessly. 'When was I ever in a healthy state of mind?' he asked.

Penrose passed the interruption over without notice. 'If I am to do you any good,' he resumed, 'I must know what is really the matter with you. The very last question that I ought to put, and that I wish to put, is the question which you force me to ask.'

'What is it?'

'When you speak of your married life,' said Penrose, 'your tone is the tone of a disappointed man. Have you any serious reason to complain of Mrs. Romayne?'

(Stella rose to her feet, in her eagerness to hear what her husband's answer would be.)

'Serious reason?' Romayne repeated.

‘How can such an idea have entered your head? I only complain of irritating trifles now and then. Even the best of women is not perfect. It’s hard to expect it from any of them.’

(The interpretation of this reply depended entirely on the tone in which it was spoken. What was the animating spirit in this case? Irony or Indulgence? Stella was ignorant of the indirect methods of irritation, by means of which Father Benwell had encouraged Romaine’s doubts of his wife’s motive for the reception of Winterfield. Her husband’s tone, expressing this state of mind, was new to her. She sat down again, divided between hope and fear, waiting to hear more. The next words, spoken by Penrose, astounded her. The priest, the Jesuit, the wily spiritual



intruder between man and wife, actually took the wife's side!)

‘Romaine,’ he proceeded quietly, ‘I want you to be happy.’

‘How am I to be happy?’

‘I will try and tell you. I believe your wife to be a good woman. I believe she loves you. There is something in her face that speaks for her—even to an inexperienced person like myself. Don't be impatient with her! Put away from you that besetting temptation to speak in irony—it is so easy to take that tone, and sometimes so cruel. I am only a looker-on, I know. Domestic happiness can never be the happiness of *my* life. But I have observed my fellow-creatures of all degrees—and this, I tell you, is the result. The largest number of happy men are the husbands

and fathers. Yes; I admit that they have terrible anxieties—but they are fortified by unfailing compensations and encouragements. Only the other day I met with a man who had suffered the loss of fortune and, worse still, the loss of health. He endured those afflictions so calmly that he surprised me. “What is the secret of your philosophy?” I asked. He answered, “I can bear anything while I have my wife and my children.” Think of that, and judge for yourself how much happiness you may have left yet ungathered in your married life.’

(Those words touched Stella’s higher nature, as the dew touches the thirsty ground. Surely they were nobly spoken! How would her husband receive them?)

‘I must think with your mind, Penrose,

before I can do what you ask of me. Is there any method of transformation by which I can change natures with you?' That was all he said—and he said it despondingly.

Penrose understood, and felt for him.

'If there is anything in my nature, worthy to be set as an example to you,' he replied, 'you know to what blessed influence I owe self-discipline and serenity of mind. Remember what I said when I left you in London, to go back to my friendless life. I told you that I found, in the Faith I held, the one sufficient consolation which helped me to bear my lot. And—if there came a time of sorrow in the future—I entreated you to remember what I had said. Have you remembered it?'

‘Look at the book here on my desk—look at the other books, within easy reach, on that table—are you satisfied?’

‘More than satisfied. Tell me—do you feel nearer to an understanding of the Faith to which I have tried to convert you?’

There was a pause. ‘Say that I do feel nearer,’ Romaine resumed—‘say that some of my objections are removed—are you really as eager as ever to make a Catholic of me, now that I am a married man?’

‘I am even more eager,’ Penrose answered. ‘I have always believed that your one sure way to happiness lay through your conversion. Now, when I know, from what I have seen and heard in this room, that you are not reconciled, as you

should be, to your new life, I am doubly confirmed in my belief. As God is my witness, I speak sincerely. Hesitate no longer! Be converted, and be happy.'

'Have you not forgotten something, Penrose?'

'What have I forgotten?'

'A serious consideration, perhaps. I have a Protestant wife.'

'I have borne that in mind, Romaine, throughout our conversation.'

'And you still say——what you have just said?'

'With my whole heart, I say it! Be converted, and be happy. Be happy, and you will be a good husband. I speak in your wife's interest as well as in yours. People who are happy in each other's society, will yield a little on either side,

even on questions of religious belief. And perhaps there may follow a more profitable result still. So far as I have observed, a good husband's example is gladly followed by his wife. Don't think that I am trying to persuade you against your will! I am only telling you, in my own justification, from what motives of love for yourself, and of true interest in your welfare, I speak. You implied just now that you had still some objections left. If I can remove them—well and good. If I fail—if you cannot act on purely conscientious conviction—I not only advise, I entreat you, to remain as you are. I shall be the first to acknowledge that you have done right.'

(This moderation of tone would appeal irresistibly, as Stella well knew, to her

husband's ready appreciation of those good qualities in others which he did not himself possess. Once more her suspicion wronged Penrose. Had he his own interested motives for pleading her cause? At the bare thought of it, she left her chair, and, standing under the window, boldly interrupted the conversation by calling to Romaine.)

‘Lewis!’ she cried, ‘why do you stay indoors on this beautiful day? I am sure Mr. Penrose would like a walk in the grounds.’

Penrose appeared alone at the window. ‘You are quite right, Mrs. Romaine,’ he said, ‘we will join you directly.’

In a few minutes he turned the corner of the house, and met Stella on the lawn. Romaine was not with him. ‘Is my husband not coming with us?’ she asked.

‘He will follow us,’ Penrose answered.  
‘I believe he has some letters to write.’

Stella looked at him, suspecting some underhand exercise of influence on her husband.

If she had been able to estimate the noble qualities in the nature of Penrose, she might have done him the justice to arrive at a truer conclusion. It was he who had asked leave (when Stella had interrupted them) to take the opportunity of speaking alone with Mrs. Romaine. He had said to his friend, ‘If I am wrong in my anticipation of the effect of your change of religion on your wife, let me find it out from herself. My one object is to act justly towards you and towards her. I should never forgive myself if I made mischief between you, no matter



how innocent of any evil intention I might be.' Romaine had understood him. It was Stella's misfortune ignorantly to misinterpret everything that Penrose said or did, for the all-sufficient reason that he was a Catholic priest. She had drawn the conclusion that her husband had deliberately left her alone with Penrose, to be persuaded or deluded into giving her sanction to aid the influence of the priest. 'They shall find they are mistaken,' she thought to herself.

'Have I interrupted an interesting conversation?' she inquired abruptly. 'When I asked you to come out, were you talking to my husband about his historical work?'

'No, Mrs. Romaine; we were not speaking at that time of the book.'

‘May I ask an odd question, Mr. Penrose?’

‘Certainly!’

‘Are you a very zealous Catholic?’

‘Pardon me. I am a priest. Surely my profession speaks for me?’

‘I hope you have not been trying to convert my husband?’

Penrose stopped and looked at her attentively. ‘Are you strongly opposed to your husband’s conversion?’ he asked.

‘As strongly,’ she answered, ‘as a woman can be.’

‘By religious conviction, Mrs. Romaine?’

‘No. By experience.’

Penrose started. ‘Is it indiscreet,’ he said gently, ‘to inquire what your experience may have been?’

‘I will tell you what my experience

has been,' Stella replied. 'I am ignorant of theological subtleties, and questions of doctrine are quite beyond me. But this I do know. A well-meaning and zealous Catholic shortened my father's life, and separated me from an only sister whom I dearly loved. I see I shock you—and I daresay you think I am exaggerating?'

'I hear what you say, Mrs. Romaine, with very great pain—I don't presume to form any opinion thus far.'

'My sad story can be told in a few words,' Stella proceeded. 'When my elder sister was still a young girl, an aunt of ours (my mother's sister) came to stay with us. She had married abroad, and she was, as I have said, a zealous Catholic. Unknown to the rest of us, she held conversations on religion with my sister—worked

on the enthusiasm which was part of the girl's nature—and accomplished her conversion. Other influences, of which I know nothing, were afterwards brought to bear on my sister. She declared her intention of entering a convent. As she was under age, my father had only to interpose his authority to prevent this. She was his favourite child. He had no heart to restrain her by force—he could only try all that the kindest and best of fathers could do to persuade her to remain at home. Even after the years that have passed, I cannot trust myself to speak of it composedly. She persisted; she was as hard as stone. My aunt, when she was entreated to interfere, called her heartless obstinacy ‘a vocation.’ My poor father's loving resistance was worn out; he slowly

drew nearer and nearer to death, from the day when she left us. Let me do her justice, if I can. She has, not only never regretted entering the convent—she is so happily absorbed in her religious duties, that she has not the slightest wish to see her mother or me. My mother's patience was soon worn out. The last time I went to the convent, I went by myself. I shall never go there again. She could not conceal her sense of relief when I took my leave of her. I need say no more. Arguments are thrown away on me, Mr. Penrose, after what I have seen and felt. I have no right to expect that the consideration of *my* happiness will influence you—but I may perhaps ask you, as a gentleman, to tell me the truth. Do you come

here with the purpose of converting my husband?'

Penrose owned the truth, without an instant's hesitation.

'I cannot take your view of your sister's pious devotion of herself to a religious life,' he said. 'But I can, and will, answer you truly. From the time when I first knew him, my dearest object has been to convert your husband to the Catholic Faith.'

Stella drew back from him, as if he had stung her, and clasped her hands in silent despair.

'But I am bound as a Christian,' he went on, 'to do to others as I would they should do to me.'

She turned on him suddenly, her beautiful face radiant with hope, her hand trembling as it caught him by the arm.

‘Speak plainly!’ she cried.

He obeyed her to the letter.

‘The happiness of my friend’s wife, Mrs. Romaine, is sacred to me for his sake. Be the good angel of your husband’s life. I abandon the purpose of converting him.’

He lifted her hand from his arm, and raised it respectfully to his lips. Then, when he had bound himself by a promise that was sacred to him, the terrible influence of the priesthood shook even that brave and lofty soul. He said to himself, as he left her, ‘God forgive me if I have done wrong!’

## CHAPTER III.

## WINTERFIELD RETURNS.

TWICE Father Benwell called at Derwent's Hotel, and twice he was informed that no news had been received there of Mr. Winterfield. At the third attempt, his constancy was rewarded. Mr. Winterfield had written, and was expected to arrive at the hotel by five o'clock.

It was then half-past four. Father Benwell decided to wait the return of his friend.

He was as anxious to deliver the papers which the proprietor of the asylum had confided to him, as if he had never broken a seal or used a counterfeit to hide the



betrayal of a trust. The re-sealed packet was safe in the pocket of his long black frock-coat. His own future proceedings depended, in some degree, on the course which Winterfield might take, when he had read the confession of the unhappy woman who had once been his wife.

Would he show the letter to Stella, at a private interview, as an unanswerable proof that she had cruelly wronged him? And would it in this case be desirable—if the thing could be done—so to handle circumstances as that Romaine might be present, unseen, and might discover the truth for himself? In the other event—that is to say, if Winterfield abstained from communicating the confession to Stella—the responsibility of making the necessary disclosure must remain with the priest.

Father Benwell walked softly up and down the room, looking about him with quietly-observant eyes. A side table in a corner was covered with letters, waiting Winterfield's return. Always ready for information of any sort, he even looked at the addresses on the letters.

The handwritings presented the customary variety of character. All but three of the envelopes showed the London district post-marks. Two of the other letters (addressed to Winterfield at his club) bore foreign post-marks; and one, as the altered direction showed, had been forwarded from Beaupark House to the hotel.

This last letter especially attracted the priest's attention.

The address was apparently in a woman's handwriting. And it was worthy

of remark that she appeared to be the only person among Winterfield's correspondents who was not acquainted with the address of his hotel or of his club. Who could the person be? The subtly-inquiring intellect of Father Benwell amused itself by speculating even on such a trifling problem as this. He little thought that he had a personal interest in the letter. The envelope contained Stella's warning to Winterfield to distrust no less a person than Father Benwell himself!

It was nearly half-past five before quick footsteps were audible outside. Winterfield entered the room.

‘This is friendly indeed!’ he said. ‘I expected to return to the worst of all solitudes—solitude in a hotel. You will stay and dine with me? That’s right. You

must have thought I was going to settle in Paris. Do you know what has kept me so long? The most delightful theatre in the world—the Opera Comique. I am so fond of the bygone school of music, Father Benwell—the flowing graceful delicious melodies of the composers who followed Mozart. One can only enjoy that music in Paris. Would you believe that I waited a week to hear Nicolo's delightful Joconde for the second time. I was almost the only young man in the stalls. All round me were the old men who remembered the first performances of the opera, beating time with their wrinkled hands to the tunes which were associated with the happiest days of their lives. What's that I hear? My dog! I was obliged to leave him here, and he knows I have come back!'

He flew to the door, and called down the stairs to have the dog set free. The spaniel rushed into the room and leaped into his master's outstretched arms. Winterfield returned his caresses, and kissed him as tenderly as a woman might have kissed her pet.

‘Dear old fellow! it’s a shame to have left you—I won’t do it again. Father Benwell, have *you* many friends who would be as glad to see you as *this* friend? I haven’t one. And there are fools who talk of a dog as an inferior being to ourselves! *This* creature’s faithful love is mine, do what I may. I might be disgraced in the estimation of every human creature I know, and he would be as true to me as ever. And look at his physical qualities. What an ugly thing, for instance,—I won’t

say your ear—I will say, my ear is; crumpled and wrinkled and naked. Look at the beautiful silky covering of *his* ear! What are our senses of smelling and hearing compared to his? We are proud of our reason. Could we find our way back, if they shut us up in a basket, and took us to a strange place away from home? If we both want to run down stairs in a hurry, which of us is securest against breaking his neck—I on my poor two legs, or he on his four? Who is the happy mortal who goes to bed without unbuttoning, and gets up again without buttoning? Here he is, on my lap, knowing I am talking about him, and too fond of me to say to himself, “What a fool my master is!”

Father Benwell listened to this rhap-

sody—so characteristic of the childish simplicity of the man—with an inward sense of impatience, which never once showed itself on the smiling surface of his face.

He had decided not to mention the papers in his pocket until some circumstance occurred which might appear to remind him naturally that he had such things about him. If he showed any anxiety to produce the envelope, he might expose himself to the suspicion of having some knowledge of the contents. When would Winterfield notice the side table, and open his letters?

The tick-tick of the clock on the mantelpiece steadily registered the progress of time, and Winterfield's fantastic attentions were still lavished on his dog.

Even Father Benwell's patience was

sorely tried when the good country-gentleman proceeded to mention not only the spaniel's name, but the occasion which had suggested it. 'We call him Traveller, and I will tell you why. When he was only a puppy he strayed into the garden at Beaupark, so weary and footsore that we concluded he had come to us from a great distance. We advertised him, but he was never claimed—and here he is! If you don't object, we will give Traveller a treat to-day. He shall have dinner with us.'

Perfectly understanding those last words, the dog jumped off his master's lap, and actually forwarded the views of Father Benwell in less than a minute more. Scampering round and round the room, as an appropriate expression of happiness, he came into collision with the side-table,



and directed Winterfield's attention to the letters by scattering them on the floor.

Father Benwell rose politely, to assist in picking up the prostrate correspondence. But Traveller was beforehand with him.

Warning the priest, with a low growl, not to interfere with another person's business, the dog picked up the letters in his mouth, and carried them by instalments to his master's feet. Even then, the exasperating Winterfield went no further than patting Traveller. Father Benwell's endurance reached its limits. 'Pray don't stand on ceremony with me,' he said. 'I will look at the newspaper while you read your letters.'

Winterfield carelessly gathered the letters together, tossed them on the dining-table at his side, and took the uppermost one of the little heap.

Fate was certainly against the priest on that evening. The first letter that Winterfield opened, led him off to another subject of conversation before he had read it to the end. Father Benwell's hand, already in his coat pocket, appeared again—empty.

‘Here's a proposal to me to go into Parliament,’ said the Squire. ‘What do you think of representative institutions, Father Benwell? To my mind, representative institutions are on their last legs. Honourable Members vote away more of our money every year. They have no alternative between suspending liberty of speech, or sitting helpless while half a dozen impudent idiots stop the progress of legislation from motives of the meanest kind. And they are not even sensitive enough to the national honour to pass a social law among themselves which makes it as dis-

graceful in a gentleman to buy a seat by bribery as to cheat at cards. I declare I think the card-sharper the least degraded person of the two. *He* doesn't encourage his inferiors to be false to a public trust. In short, my dear sir, everything wears out in this world—and why should the House of Commons be an exception to the rule?’

He picked up the next letter from the heap. As he looked at the address, his face changed. The smile left his lips, the gaiety died out of his eyes. Traveller, entreating for more notice with impatient fore paws applied to his master's knees, saw the alteration, and dropped into a respectfully recumbent position. Father Benwell glanced sidelong off the columns of the newspaper, and waited for events with all the discretion, and none of the good faith, of the dog.

‘Forwarded from Beaupark,’ Winterfield said to himself. He opened the letter—read it carefully to the end—thought over it—and read it again.

‘Father Benwell!’ he said suddenly.

The priest put down the newspaper. For a few moments more nothing was audible but the steady tick-tick of the clock.

‘We have not been very long acquainted,’ Winterfield resumed. ‘But our association has been a pleasant one, and I think I owe to you the duty of a friend. I don’t belong to your Church; but I hope you will believe me when I say that ignorant prejudice against the Catholic priesthood is not one of *my* prejudices.’

Father Benwell bowed, in silence.

‘You are mentioned,’ Winterfield proceeded, ‘in the letter which I have just read.’

‘Are you at liberty to tell me the name of your correspondent?’ Father Benwell asked.

‘I am not at liberty to do that. But I think it due to you, and to myself, to tell you what the substance of the letter is. The writer warns me to be careful in my intercourse with you. Your object (I am told) is to make yourself acquainted with events in my past life, and you have some motive which my correspondent has thus far failed to discover. I speak plainly, but I beg you to understand that I also speak impartially. I condemn no man unheard—least of all, a man whom I have had the honour of receiving under my own roof.’

He spoke with a certain simple dignity. With equal dignity, Father Benwell answered. It is needless to say that he now

knew Winterfield's correspondent to be Romaine's wife.

‘Let me sincerely thank you, Mr. Winterfield, for a candour which does honour to us both,’ he said. ‘You will hardly expect me—if I may use such an expression—to condescend to justify myself against an accusation, which is an anonymous accusation so far as I am concerned. I prefer to meet that letter by a plain proof; and I leave you to judge whether I am still worthy of the friendship to which you have so kindly alluded.’

With this preface he briefly related the circumstances under which he had become possessed of the packet, and then handed it to Winterfield—with the seal uppermost.

‘Decide for yourself,’ he concluded, ‘whether a man bent on prying into your

private affairs, with that letter entirely at his mercy, would have been true to the trust reposed in him.'

He rose and took his hat, ready to leave the room, if his honour was profaned by the slightest expression of distrust. Winterfield's genial and unsuspecting nature instantly accepted the offered proof as conclusive. 'Before I break the seal,' he said, 'let me do you justice. Sit down again, Father Benwell, and forgive me if my sense of duty has hurried me into hurting your feelings. No man ought to know better than I do how often people misjudge and wrong each other.'

They shook hands cordially. No moral relief is more eagerly sought than relief from the pressure of a serious explanation. By common consent, they now spoke as

lightly as if nothing had happened. Father Benwell set the example.

‘You actually believe in a priest!’ he said gaily. ‘We shall make a good Catholic of you yet.’

‘Don’t be too sure of that,’ Winterfield replied, with a touch of his quaint humour. ‘I respect the men who have given to humanity the inestimable blessing of quinine—to say nothing of preserving learning and civilisation—but I respect still more my own liberty as a free Christian.’

‘Perhaps a free thinker, Mr. Winterfield?’

‘Anything you like to call it, Father Benwell, so long as it *is* free.’

They both laughed. Father Benwell went back to his newspaper. Winterfield broke the seal of the envelope and took out the enclosures.



The confession was the first of the papers at which he happened to look. At the opening lines he turned pale. He read more, and his eyes filled with tears. In low broken tones he said to the priest, 'You have innocently brought me most distressing news. I entreat your pardon if I ask to be left alone.'

Father Benwell said a few well-chosen words of sympathy, and immediately withdrew. The dog licked his master's hand, hanging listlessly over the arm of the chair.

Later in the evening, a note from Winterfield was left by messenger at the priest's lodgings. The writer announced, with renewed expressions of regret, that he would be again absent from London on the next day, but that he hoped to return to the

hotel and receive his guest on the evening of the day after.

Father Benwell rightly conjectured that Winterfield's destination was the town in which his wife had died.

His object in taking the journey was not, as the priest supposed, to address inquiries to the rector and the landlady, who had been present at the fatal illness and the death—but to justify his wife's last expression of belief in the mercy and compassion of the man whom she had injured. On that 'nameless grave,' so sadly and so humbly referred to in the confession, he had resolved to place a simple stone cross, giving to her memory the name which she had shrunk from profaning in her lifetime. When he had written the brief inscription which recorded the death of 'Emma, wife

of Bernard Winterfield,' and when he had knelt for awhile by the low turf mound, his errand had come to its end. He thanked the good rector; he left gifts with the landlady and her children, by which he was gratefully remembered for many a year afterwards; and then, with a heart relieved, he went back to London.

Other men might have made their sad little pilgrimage alone. Winterfield took his dog with him. 'I must have something to love,' he said to the rector, 'at such a time as this.'

## CHAPTER IV.

## FATHER BENWELL'S CORRESPONDENCE.

*To the Secretary, S. J., Rome.*

WHEN I wrote last, I hardly thought I should trouble you again so soon. The necessity has, however, arisen. I must ask for instructions, from our Most Reverend General, on the subject of Arthur Penrose.

I believe I informed you that I decided to defer my next visit to Ten Acres Lodge for two or three days, in order that Winterfield (if he intended to do so) might have time to communicate with Mrs. Romaine, after his return from the country. Naturally enough, perhaps, considering the deli-

cacy of the subject, he has not taken me into his confidence. I can only guess that he has maintained the same reserve with Mrs. Romaine.

My visit to the Lodge was duly paid this afternoon.

I asked first, of course, for the lady of the house, and hearing she was in the grounds, joined her there. She looked ill and anxious, and she received me with rigid politeness. Fortunately, Mrs. Eyrecourt (now convalescent) was staying at Ten Acres, and was then taking the air in her chair on wheels. The good lady's nimble and discursive tongue offered me an opportunity of referring, in the most innocent manner possible, to Winterfield's favourable opinion of Romaine's pictures. I need hardly say that I looked at

Romayne's wife when I mentioned the name. She turned pale—probably fearing that I had some knowledge of her letter warning Winterfield not to trust me. If she had already been informed that he was not to be blamed, but to be pitied, in the matter of the marriage at Brussels, she would have turned red. Such, at least, is my experience, drawn from recollections of other days.<sup>1</sup>

The ladies having served my purpose, I ventured into the house, to pay my respects to Romayne.

He was in the study, and his excellent friend and secretary was with him. After

<sup>1</sup> Father Bénwell's experience had, in this case, not misled him. If Stella had remained unmarried, Winterfield might have justified himself. But he was honourably unwilling to disturb her relations with her husband, by satisfying her that he had never been unworthy of the affection which had once united them.

the first greetings, Penrose left us. His manner told me plainly that there was something wrong. I asked no questions—waiting on the chance that Romaine might enlighten me.

‘I hope you are in better spirits, now that you have your old companion with you,’ I said.

‘I am very glad to have Penrose with me,’ he answered. And then he frowned, and looked out of the window at the two ladies in the grounds.

It occurred to me that Mrs. Eyrecourt might be occupying the customary false position of a mother-in-law. I was mistaken. He was not thinking of his wife’s mother—he was thinking of his wife.

‘I suppose you know that Penrose had an idea of converting me?’ he said suddenly.

I was perfectly candid with him—I said I knew it, and approved of it. ‘May I hope that Arthur has succeeded in convincing you?’ I ventured to add.

‘He might have succeeded, Father Benwell, if he had chosen to go on.’

This reply, as you may easily imagine, took me by surprise.

‘Are you really so obdurate that Arthur despairs of your conversion?’ I asked.

‘Nothing of the sort! I have thought and thought of it—and I can tell you I was more than ready to meet him half way.’

‘Then where is the obstacle!’ I exclaimed.

He pointed through the window to his wife. ‘There is the obstacle,’ he said, in a tone of ironical resignation.



Knowing Arthur's character as I knew it, I at last understood what had happened. For a moment I felt really angry. Under these circumstances, the wise course was to say nothing, until I could be sure of speaking with exemplary moderation. It doesn't do for a man in my position to show anger.

Romayne went on.

'We talked of my wife, Father Benwell, the last time you were here. You only knew, then, that her reception of Mr. Winterfield had determined him never to enter my house again. By way of adding to your information on the subject of "petticoat government," I may now tell you that Mrs. Romayne has forbidden Penrose to proceed with the attempt to convert me. By common consent, the subject is never mentioned between us.' The bitter

irony of his tone, thus far, suddenly disappeared. He spoke eagerly and anxiously. 'I hope you are not angry with Arthur?' he said.

By this time my little fit of ill-temper was at an end. I answered—and it was really in a certain sense true—'I know Arthur too well to be angry with him.'

Romayne seemed to be relieved. 'I only troubled you with this last domestic incident,' he resumed, 'to bespeak your indulgence for Penrose. I am getting learned in the hierarchy of the Church, Father Benwell! You are the superior of my dear little friend, and you exercise authority over him. Oh, he is the kindest and best of men! It is not his fault. He submits to Mrs. Romayne—against his own better conviction—in the honest belief that he

consults the interests of our married life.

I don't think I misinterpret the state of Romaine's mind, and mislead you, when I express my belief that this second indiscreet interference of his wife between his friend and himself will produce the very result which she dreads. Mark my words, written after the closest observation of him—this new irritation of Romaine's sensitive self-respect will hasten his conversion.

You will understand that the one alternative before me, after what has happened, is to fill the place from which Penrose has withdrawn. I abstained from breathing a word of this to Romaine. It is he, if I can manage it, who must invite me to complete the work of conversion—and, besides, nothing can be done until the visit

of Penrose has come to an end. Romaine's secret sense of irritation may be safely left to develop itself, with time to help it.

I changed the conversation to the subject of his literary labours.

The present state of his mind is not favourable to work of that exacting kind. Even with the help of Penrose to encourage him, he does not get on to his satisfaction—and yet, as I could plainly perceive, the ambition to make a name in the world exercises a stronger influence over him than ever. All in our favour, my reverend friend—all in our favour!

I took the liberty of asking to see Penrose alone for a moment; and, this request granted, Romaine and I parted cordially. I can make most people like me, when I choose to try. The master of Vange Abbey

is no exception to the rule. Did I tell you, by-the-bye, that the property has a little declined of late in value? It is now not worth more than six thousand a year. *We* will improve it, when it returns to the Church.

My interview with Penrose was over in two minutes. Dispensing with formality, I took his arm, and led him into the front garden.

‘I have heard all about it,’ I said; ‘and I must not deny that you have disappointed me. But I know your disposition, and I make allowances. You have qualities, dear Arthur, which perhaps put you a little out of place among Us. I shall be obliged to report what you have done—but you may trust me to put it favourably. Shake hands, my son, and

while we are still together, let us be as good friends as ever.'

You may think that I spoke in this way with a view to my indulgent language being repeated to Romaine, and so improving the position which I have already gained in his estimation. Do you know, I really believe I meant it at the time! The poor fellow gratefully kissed my hand when I offered it to him—he was not able to speak. I wonder whether I am weak about Arthur? Say a kind word for him, when his conduct comes under notice—but pray don't mention this little frailty of mine; and don't suppose I have any sympathy with his weak-minded submission to Mrs. Romaine's prejudices. If I ever felt the smallest consideration for *her* (and I cannot call to mind any amiable emotion of that sort), her letter

to Winterfield would have effectually extinguished it. There is something quite revolting to me in a deceitful woman.

In closing this letter, I may quiet the minds of our reverend brethren, if I assure them that my former objection to associating myself directly with the conversion of Romaine no longer exists.

Yes! even at my age, and with my habits, I am now resigned to hearing, and confuting, the trivial arguments of a man who is young enough to be my son. I shall write a carefully-guarded letter to Romaine, on the departure of Penrose; and I shall send him a book to read, from the influence of which I expect gratifying results. It is not a controversial work (Arthur has been beforehand with me there)—it is Wiseman's 'Recollections of the Popes.' I look to

that essentially readable book to excite Romaine's imagination, by vivid descriptions of the splendours of the Church, and the vast influence and power of the higher priesthood. Does this sudden enthusiasm of mine surprise you? And are you altogether at a loss to know what it means?

It means, my friend, that I see our position towards Romaine in a new light. Forgive me, if I say no more for the present. I prefer to be silent, until my audacity is justified by events.



## CHAPTER V.

## BERNARD WINTERFIELD'S CORRESPONDENCE.

## I.

*From Mrs. Romaine to Mr. Winterfield.*

HAS my letter failed to reach you? I directed it (as I direct this) to Beaupark, not knowing your London address.

Yesterday, Father Benwell called at Ten Acres Lodge. He first saw my mother and myself, and he contrived to mention your name. It was done with his usual adroitness, and I might perhaps have passed it over if he had not looked at me. I hope, and pray, it may be only my fancy—but I thought I saw, in his eyes, that he was

conscious of having me in his power, and that he might betray me to my husband at any moment.

I have no sort of claim on you. And, heaven knows, I have little reason to trust you. But I thought you meant fairly by me when we spoke together at this house. In that belief, I entreat you to tell me if Father Benwell has intruded himself into your confidence—or even if you have hinted anything to him which gives him a hold over me.

## II.

*From Mr. Winterfield to Mrs. Romaine.*

Both your letters have reached me.

I have good reason for believing that you are entirely mistaken in your estimate of Father Benwell's character. But I know,

by sad experience, how you hold to your opinions when they are once formed; and I am eager to relieve you of all anxiety, so far as I am concerned. I have not said one word—I have not even let slip the slightest hint—which could inform Father Benwell of that past event in our lives to which your letter alludes. Your secret is a sacred secret to me; and it has been, and shall be, sacredly kept.

There is a sentence in your letter which has given me great pain. You reiterate the cruel language of the bygone time. You say, ‘Heaven knows I have little reason to trust you.’

I have reasons, on my side, for not justifying myself—except under certain conditions. I mean under conditions, which might place me in a position to serve and

advise you as a friend or brother. In that case, I undertake to prove, even to you, that it was a cruel injustice ever to have doubted me, and that there is no man living whom you can more implicitly trust than myself.

My address, when I am in London, is at the head of this page.

### III.

*From Doctor Wybrow to Mr. Winterfield.*

Dear Sir,—I have received your letter, mentioning that you wish to accompany me, at my next visit to the asylum, to see the French boy, so strangely associated with the papers delivered to you by Father Benwell.

Your proposal reaches me too late. The poor creature's troubled life has come to an end. He never rallied from the exhausting effect of the fever. To the last

he was attended by his mother. I write with true sympathy for that excellent lady—but I cannot conceal from you or from myself that this death is not to be regretted. In a case of the same extraordinary kind, recorded in print, the patient recovered from the fever, and his insanity returned with his returning health.

—Faithfully yours,

JOSEPH WYBROW.

## CHAPTER VI.

## THE SADDEST OF ALL WORDS.

ON the tenth morning, dating from the despatch of Father Benwell's last letter to Rome, Penrose was writing in the study at Ten Acres Lodge, while Romaine sat at the other end of the room, looking listlessly at a blank sheet of paper, with the pen lying idle beside it. On a sudden he rose, and, snatching up paper and pen, threw them irritably into the fire.

‘Don't trouble yourself to write any longer,’ he said to Penrose. ‘My dream is over. Throw my manuscripts into the waste

paper basket, and never speak to me of literary work again.'

'Every man devoted to literature has these fits of despondency,' Penrose answered. 'Don't think of your work. Send for your horse, and trust to fresh air and exercise to relieve your mind.'

Romayne barely listened. He turned round at the fireplace, and studied the reflection of his face in the glass.

'I look worse and worse,' he said thoughtfully to himself.

It was true. His flesh had fallen away; his face had withered and whitened; he stooped like an old man. The change for the worse had been steadily proceeding from the time when he left Vange Abbey.

'It's useless to conceal it from me!' he burst out, turning towards Penrose. 'I

believe I am in some way answerable—though you all deny it—for the French boy's death. Why not? His voice is still in my ears, and the stain of his brother's blood is on me. I am under a spell! Do you believe in the witches—the merciless old women who made wax images of the people who injured them, and stuck pins in their mock likenesses, to register the slow wasting away of their victims day after day? People disbelieve it in these times, but it has never been disproved.' He stopped, looked at Penrose, and suddenly changed his tone. 'Arthur! what is the matter with you? have you had a bad night? Has anything happened?'

For the first time in Romaine's experience of him, Penrose answered evasively.

'Is there nothing to make me anxious,



he said, 'when I hear you talk as you are talking now? The poor French boy died of a fever. Must I remind you again that he owed the happiest days of his life to you and your good wife?'

Romayne still looked at him, without attending to what he said.

'Surely you don't think I am deceiving you?' Penrose remonstrated.

'No; I was thinking of something else. I was wondering whether I really know you as well as I thought I did. Am I mistaken in supposing that you are not an ambitious man?'

'My only ambition is to lead a worthy life, and to be as useful to my fellow-creatures as I can. Does that satisfy you?'

Romayne hesitated. 'It seems strange ——' he began.

‘What seems strange?’

‘I don’t say it seems strange that you should be a priest,’ Romaine explained. ‘I am only surprised that a man of your simple way of thinking should have attached himself to the Order of the Jesuits.’

‘I can quite understand that,’ said Penrose. ‘But you should remember that circumstances often influence a man in his choice of a vocation. It has been so with me. I am a member of a Roman Catholic family. A Jesuit College was near our place of abode, and a near relative of mine—since dead—was one of the resident priests.’ He paused, and added, in a lower tone, ‘When I was little more than a lad I suffered a disappointment, which altered my character for life. I took refuge in the College, and I have found patience and peace of

mind since that time. Oh, my friend, you might have been a more contented man——’ He stopped again. His interest in the husband had all but deceived him into forgetting his promise to the wife.

Romayne held out his hand. ‘I hope I have not thoughtlessly hurt you?’ he said.

Penrose took the offered hand, and pressed it fervently. He tried to speak—and suddenly shuddered, like a man in pain. ‘I am not very well this morning,’ he stammered; ‘a turn in the garden will do me good.’

Romayne’s doubts were confirmed by the manner in which Penrose left him. Something had unquestionably happened, which his friend shrank from communicating to him. He sat down again at his desk, and tried to read. The time passed—and

he was still left alone. When the door was at last opened, it was only Stella who entered the room.

‘Have you seen Penrose?’ he asked.

The estrangement between them had been steadily widening of late. Romaine had expressed his resentment at his wife’s interference between Penrose and himself, by that air of contemptuous endurance which is the hardest penalty that a man can inflict on the woman who loves him. Stella had submitted with a proud and silent resignation—the most unfortunate form of protest that she could have adopted towards a man of Romaine’s temper. When she now appeared, however, in her husband’s study, there was a change in her expression which he instantly noticed. She looked at him with eyes softened by sorrow. Before she could

answer his first question, he hurriedly added another. 'Is Penrose really ill?'

'No, Lewis. He is distressed.'

'About what?'

'About you, and about himself.'

'Is he going to leave us?'

'Yes.'

'But he will come back again?'

Stella took a chair by her husband's side. 'I am truly sorry for you, Lewis,' she said. 'It is even a sad parting for Me. If you will let me say it, I have a sincere regard for dear Mr. Penrose.'

Under other circumstances, this confession of feeling for the man who had sacrificed his dearest aspiration to the one consideration of her happiness, might have provoked a sharp reply. But by this time Romaine had really become alarmed.

‘You speak as if Arthur was going to leave England,’ he said.

‘He leaves England this afternoon,’ she answered, ‘for Rome.’

‘Why does he tell this to you, and not to me?’ Romaine asked.

‘He cannot trust himself to speak of it to you. He begged me to prepare you —’

Her courage failed her. She paused. Romaine beat his hand impatiently on the desk before him. ‘Speak out!’ he cried. ‘If Rome is not the end of the journey—what is?’

Stella hesitated no longer.

‘He goes to Rome,’ she said, ‘to receive his instructions, and to become personally acquainted with the missionaries who are associated with him. They will

leave Leghorn in the next vessel which sets sail for a port in Central America. And the dangerous duty entrusted to them is to re-establish one of the Jesuit missions destroyed by the savages years since. They will find their church a ruin, and not a vestige left of the house once inhabited by the murdered priests. It is not concealed from them that they may be martyred too. They are soldiers of the Cross; and they go—willingly go—to save the souls of the Indians, at the peril of their lives.'

Romayne rose, and advanced to the door. There, he turned, and spoke to Stella. 'Where is Arthur?' he said.

Stella gently detained him.

'There was one word more he entreated me to say—pray, wait and hear it,' she

pleaded. 'His one grief is at leaving You. Apart from that, he devotes himself gladly to the dreadful service which claims him. He has long looked forward to it, and has long prepared himself for it. Those, Lewis, are his own words.'

There was a knock at the door. The servant appeared, to announce that the carriage was waiting.

Penrose entered the room as the man left it.

'Have you spoken for me?' he said to Stella.

She could only answer him by a gesture. He turned to Romaine, with a faint smile.

'The saddest of all words must be spoken,' he said. 'Farewell!'

Pale and trembling, Romaine took his



hand. 'Is this Father Benwell's doing?' he asked.

'No!' Penrose answered, firmly. 'In Father Benwell's position it might have been his doing, but for his goodness to me. For the first time since I have known him, he has shrunk from a responsibility. For my sake he has left it to Rome. And Rome has spoken. Oh, my more than friend—my brother in love——!'

His voice failed him. With a resolution which was nothing less than heroic in a man of his affectionate nature, he recovered his composure.

'Let us make it as little miserable as it *can* be,' he said. 'At every opportunity we will write to each other. And, who knows—I may yet come back to you? God has preserved his servants in dangers

as great as any that I shall encounter. May that merciful God bless and protect you. Oh, Romaine, what happy days we have had together!' His last powers of resistance were worn out. Tears of noble sorrow dimmed the friendly eyes which had never once looked unkindly on the brother of his love. He kissed Romaine. 'Help me out!' he said, turning blindly towards the hall, in which the servant was waiting. That last act of mercy was not left to a servant. With sisterly tenderness, Stella took his hand and led him away. 'I shall remember you gratefully as long as I live,' she said to him when the carriage door was closed. He waved his hand at the window, and she saw him no more.

She returned to the study.

The relief of tears had not come to Romaine. He had dropped into a chair when Penrose left him. In stony silence he sat there, his head down, his eyes dry and staring. The miserable days of their estrangement were forgotten by his wife in the moment when she looked at him. She knelt by his side, and lifted his head a little, and laid it on her bosom. Her heart was full—she let the caress plead for her silently. He felt it; his cold fingers pressed her hand thankfully; but he said nothing. After a long interval, the first outward expression of sorrow that fell from his lips showed that he was still thinking of Penrose.

‘Every blessing falls away from me,’ he said, ‘I have lost my best friend.’